

T. Times 511

Chapter 511: Beneath the Veil of Loyalty

Di Muzhi arrived with perfect timing, as if orchestrated. Just as the camp had been fully set up, he arrived precisely on cue.

The soldiers began lighting fires and preparing food. Clad in scholarly robes, Di Muzhi sat in the command tent, drinking wine. A bonfire burned within the tent, with a personal guard roasting meat while two maidservants stood on either side, pouring wine for him. Around him, generals laughed and indulged in pleasure.

Di Muzhi's long-serving aide, Xie Ruhai, stood at his side, along with another scholar whom Zhao Changhe did not recognize, seated in the main guest's seat.

Zhao Changhe stepped into the command tent, his eyes surveying the scene with an impassive expression.

Are these scum seriously hosting a bonfire party in the middle of a military campaign?

"Ah, I wondered which esteemed agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau it was. So it turns out to be Zhao Changhe." Di Muzhi greeted him with a hearty laugh. "Sit, sit—have you eaten yet? Join us."

Without betraying any emotion, Zhao Changhe took a seat befitting status just beneath that of a guest of honor. "Prefectural Governor Di, do you know me personally?"

"Hah! Who doesn't know the name of Blood Asura Zhao Changhe? Your name resounds across the Central Plains? Who wouldn't recognize you? Young Hero Zhao, your close ties with First Seat Tang are no secret, either. It's only natural for someone such as yourself to be an agent of the Demon Suppression Bureau!" Di Muzhi then warmly introduced the scholar in the seat of honor. "Let me introduce you to Sir Lu Shouyi, an envoy from the imperial court!"

Lu Shouyi, fully aware of Zhao Changhe's sensitive standing, offered a broad smile, standing to clasp his hands in greeting. "Mister Zhao, your name is known far and wide. An honor, truly."

“Likewise,” Zhao Changhe responded perfunctorily, clasping his hands briefly in return. He was inwardly relieved that he was not recognized as the Wang Daozhong from before.

But, as if reading his thoughts, Di Muzhi added, “Young Hero Zhao, did you know that Wang Daozhong came to see me just a few days ago?”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “A few days ago?”

Wasn’t it supposed to be over a month ago? And why would he suddenly bring up Wang Daozhong anyway?

Di Muzhi continued, “He was injured and pursued by Xue Canghai of the Blood God Cult, and he fled to Shu seeking my assistance. I had heard that during the Battle of Xiangyang, the Blood God Cult was conscripted by the imperial court, and that they even fought on behalf of the empire, correct? That was all thanks to you, wasn’t it, Young Hero Zhao?”

Zhao Changhe was even more intrigued. Good grief, Old Xue can now chase down someone from the Ranking of Earth? That’s pretty impressive... But how did Wang Daozhong get injured in the first place?

“Indeed, the Blood God Cult has been conscripted by the empire. What happened next?”

Di Muzhi responded, “Given that the Blood God Cult now serves the empire, while the Wang Clan has shown clear rebellious intent, and Wang Daozhong had only just broken out of prison, the imperial court is obviously seeking to apprehend a traitor. How could I possibly help Wang Daozhong? Of course, Young Hero Zhao, do not misunderstand—I would never openly offend the Wang Clan, but I chose to avoid him altogether. With Xue Canghai hot on his heels, Wang Daozhong had no choice but to flee southward, likely into Miaojiang... Did you not encounter him while coming here from the south?”

“There are countless routes that someone can take in this region. It’s hardly likely that I’d cross paths with him by chance,” Zhao Changhe replied casually, yet inwardly he felt a sense of unease.

Is Di Muzhi hinting that he knows I impersonated Wang Daozhong? But that doesn’t seem to be that important now.

Shi Wuding taking action a while back to apprehend Wang Daozhong was likely done under Di Muzhi's orders. Di Muzhi's stance had been consistent all along—he genuinely seemed to be acting on behalf of the imperial court against Wang Daozhong. Remarkably, this made him the most loyal among the many self-interested regional lords Zhao Changhe had encountered over the past two years. Even Cui Wenjing and Yang Jingxiu might not be as “loyal” as Di Muzhi.

Perhaps the real issue lay in those who saw themselves as officials of the Great Xia—people such as Di Muzhi.

While they spoke, a maid approached to refill the wine. Zhao Changhe lowered his eyes, observing the maid as she poured, and said coolly, “Forgive my bluntness, prefectural governor, but such conduct... hardly befits military regulations.”

“When in the field, the general's orders are supreme. As the commander, the military discipline and regulations are mine to determine, are they not?” Di Muzhi laughed heartily. “Even Lord Lu has no objections.”

Lu Shouyi stroked his beard and smiled. “The soldiers endure hardships during campaigns. When it's time for them to relax, they should indeed be allowed to do so.”

Zhao Changhe felt his face twitch. If the emaciated soldiers outside, eating moldy rations, were to hear this, they might want to shove that same food into your mouths. Keeping a neutral expression, he asked, “Strict military discipline isn't for show. Prefectural governor, have you considered what might happen if you lose?”

Di Muzhi exchanged a glance with Lu Shouyi and asked, “Young Hero Zhao, you are the bearer of a jade token, after all. Perhaps you have some information to share on Miaojiang's forces?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Lei Zhentang has successfully formed an alliance among the tribes. Around Erhai alone, the combined tribal forces number fifty to sixty thousand, with countless more across Miaojiang. The terrain is challenging, with poisonous miasma present everywhere, and their witchcraft is strange and unpredictable. Advancing deep into enemy territory will make maintaining supply lines nearly impossible... If I were in command, I'd deem it an unwinnable battle. I wonder what gives you all this confidence, Prefectural Governor Di.”

Di Muzhi lowered his voice. “Do you think they will launch an attack, Young Hero Zhao?”

Zhao Changhe shook his head. “The chances of that are slim. It’s difficult for us to advance, and equally challenging for them to break out. Moreover, if they do leave, they lose their geographical advantage.”

Di Muzhi clapped his hands. “Exactly. According to reports from the Miaojiang branch of the Demon Suppression Bureau, they aren’t united. They’ve formed some kind of Five-Tribe Council, which likely harbors internal conflicts and rivalries for dominance... making it even less likely that they’ll launch an attack.”

Zhao Changhe mused silently. Heh, this information must have come from Li Sian. No matter how much he might be helping Taoyuan Town with its affairs, his official duty remains with the Demon Suppression Bureau. Well, at least his report didn’t mention my involvement...

Di Muzhi leaned in closer, his voice lowered even further as he said, “Since they aren’t going to come out, why must we force our way in? It’s not something the forces of Shu can accomplish alone. We simply need to hold our ground—that itself is a major contribution. When it comes time to quell the rebellion from Miaojiang, the imperial court will send its own generals.”

Zhao Changhe’s heart gave a sudden jolt, and he finally understood Di Muzhi’s logic.

Miaojiang’s rebellion could very well be attributed to Di Muzhi’s oppressive rule, yet there were no witnesses left, as people like the pacification commissioner, Lan Tiankuo, had long since perished. What value did the slogans of rebel leaders like Lei Zhentang hold? It could all be dismissed as an excuse for rebellion. All of those were far from enough to shake Di Muzhi. Even if Li Sian had not made any reports, it could be debated in court. At the end of the day, the so-called extortion by Di Muzhi was hardly heavier than what Lei Zhentang and other leaders were doing themselves. It was difficult to define culpability.

Di Muzhi obviously had connections in the court. Lu Shouyi, from Fanyang, sat right beside him, enjoying his wine—an imperial envoy no less. This imperial envoy had likely been sent here to investigate the situation, but it was clear that whatever investigation he’d done was a farce. The two were clearly in collusion.

If Xia Longyuan were in charge, such deception would never fly, but Xia Longyuan was decidedly uninvolved. It was almost predictable that Di Muzhi would face little blame in the court, if any, and even that could be easily dealt with. Even a censure from Tang Wanzhuang would not matter much. The Demon Suppression Bureau’s power of oversight was hard to use openly, and on the surface, it lacked the formal authority for such actions.

In other words, what could very well be considered a calamity caused by Di Muzhi was being completely glossed over. Since the enemy could not break out, Di Muzhi would instead claim a “merit in defending the territory” and rise in rank.

How could he prove that forces from within Miaojiang attacked? He could easily dress the severed heads of murdered Xia villagers with the hairstyle of those from the region... Then, there you have it—proof of an attack by the tribes of Miaojiang, successfully repelled.

Di Muzhi, indeed, had no intention of rebelling. He was, in his way, a “loyal” official of Great Xia.

But such officials... bred countless rebels.

In just a few casual sentences, Zhao Changhe’s purpose in visiting Di Muzhi had been fulfilled. There was no grand scheme, no collusion with Lei Zhentang... Di Muzhi was even rather forthright about it, as though this was all something universally understood, a matter of course.

I even helped you deal with Wang Daozhong—I’m a loyal official, my stance unwaveringly with the imperial court.

Yet Zhao Changhe’s rage only intensified; veins bulged on his hand as he clenched his wine cup.

I schemed in Miaojiang, helped form the Five Tribes Council, and sheltered countless Xia people—all so you could pull off something like this?

And if I hadn’t been here? Would you have even cared if all the Xia people in Miaojiang were slaughtered?

Di Muzhi, keenly observing Zhao Changhe’s demeanor, sensed something was wrong and whispered, “Naturally, the credit for this accomplishment will include Young Hero Zhao... In addition, I’ve heard that Young Hero Zhao has been troubled by issues with your meridians. We possess some supplements here that might be of use...”

Zhao Changhe knew that he could not reveal his true emotions just yet. There was still one more question to be answered.

Suppressing his fury, Zhao Changhe slowly spoke, “Thank you for your generosity, prefectural governor. However, there is one more matter I’d like to inquire about.”

Di Muzhi seemed to let out a sigh of relief, smiling as he said, “Please, Young Hero Zhao, go ahead.”

“How much do you know about the matters surrounding the Bashan Sword Hut?”

Di Muzhi shook his head. “The Sword Hut has always been a renowned sect of Shu. They have extensive relations across many factions. I have no idea why they decided to relocate to Miaojiang. On that note, I’m curious—how did Sect Master Shi manage to offend you, leading to his death at the hands of you and Heroine Yue? The Sword Hut should be a righteous path, is it not?”

Zhao Changhe watched his eyes carefully and spoke slowly. “In truth, it was not us who killed Shi Wuding—or rather, we merely took advantage of an opportunity to kill him when he was already gravely wounded. Otherwise, how could Hongling and I have possibly killed someone ranked sixth on the Ranking of Earth?”

Di Muzhi smiled. “That’s still quite impressive... Do you know who wounded Sect Master Shi first?”

Zhao Changhe enunciated each word deliberately, “The figure ranked sixth on the Ranking of Heaven, the pavilion master of the Snow-Listening Pavilion, Snow Owl—do you know them, Prefectural Governor Di?”

Di Muzhi hesitated, a flicker of disbelief crossing his face, before waving his hand with a laugh. “The sixth on the Ranking of Heaven, the pavilion master of the Snow-Listening Pavilion—who wouldn’t know of such a figure? But I’ve never had the fortune to meet someone of such caliber...”

Zhao Changhe immediately understood. Not only had Di Muzhi met Snow Owl before; he even knew that Snow Owl could not have been the one to kill Shi Wuding!

Just as he was about to press further, he suddenly felt something akin to an earthquake from the distance.

Di Muzhi had evidently noticed it as well and immediately stood up, revealing a cultivation level on par with Zhao Changhe’s—perhaps even slightly superior.

He really has reached the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

A messenger quickly entered the tent to report, “Prefectural governor, bad news! Thousands of enemy troops are charging toward our camp!”

“Thousands? We have over forty thousand here. Are they coming to die?” Di Muzhi exclaimed in shock. “Could it be that the Miao are actually attacking us? But why would they be coming from the east?”

“No, it’s not the Miao!” Another soldier burst into the tent in a rush. “We saw their command banner—it had a large character Li[1] on it.”

Di Muzhi’s face changed drastically. “Li Shentong!”

Chapter 512: Snow Owl

The Miao in the south yet dared not cross their borders, and thus heroes descended from Emei.

Perhaps Li Shentong had been waiting for this moment for a long time... waiting for the opportunity that Di Muzhi’s departure from the heart of Shu would provide!

He could not secretly develop a vast hidden force like Maitreya—he only had so many followers. How could he conquer cities and seize territory? Even the bandits of Mount Liang could barely hold a city after breaking through its gates; ultimately, they were forced to retreat back to their mountain and once more reduced to mere bandits[1]...

To attack Chengdu[2] directly or quietly take off Di Muzhi’s head might have been easy for Li Shentong. But there was a lurking threat—a venomous snake in the shadows.

Snow Owl was an assassin. As long as an assassin remained hidden, the level of threat they posed was at its greatest. Thus, Li Shentong had endured, waiting for his chance.

It was only a dignified, open confrontation that could break that threat.

In a clash of armies, an assassin would have no choice but to draw their sword and face their enemy head-on.

This was exactly what Li Shentong wanted; he wanted Snow Owl to confront him directly. Once an assassin was exposed, a man forged as iron would have nothing to fear.

And so it happened that Di Muzhi led his troops southward, away from the core of Shu, to the open plains of Litang. When Li Shentong received this news, he only needed a single breath of time to decide. In the next moment, the disciples of the Divine Brilliance Sect swept down from their mountain, decisively launching their assault.

Di Muzhi had just been thinking that no matter how disorganized his army was, it hardly mattered since the Miao would not dare attack. Yet he now found himself facing a truly ironic situation as he confronted the charge of several thousand elites from the Divine Brilliance Sect.

Di Muzhi and the other high-ranking officers in the command tent hurriedly headed toward the gate to witness the approaching flood of enemies. Every single one of their faces bore a grim expression.

Just looking at the bronze-skinned man leading the charge, they felt as if they were seeing the King of Hell coming to claim their lives.

It was Li Shentong, fifth on the Ranking of Heaven!

In this setting, he was even more fearsome than the fourth-ranked Yuxu... because he was truly impervious to weapons, and ordinary soldiers truly meant nothing to him!

“Release the arrows! Release the arrows!”

In all fairness, numbers did provide some advantages. No matter how disorganized the army, when tens of thousands of soldiers loosed arrows at once, it was a magnificent sight—darkening the sky, blotting out the sun.

Yet Li Shentong surged forward, and this rain of arrows fell upon him as if it was nothing more than a gentle drizzle, incapable of even scratching him a little.

In the blink of an eye, Li Shentong reached the gate of the camp, and from a fair distance, he unleashed a punch.

Boom!

With a thunderous roar like that of an earthen dragon, a powerful blast of energy shattered the gate into splinters. It offered no resistance whatsoever, and many of the soldiers standing behind the gate were turned into pulp from the sheer force of the blow.

Not even the most powerful battering ram could do something like that. In fact, Zhao Changhe felt that the strike had the power of an explosive cannon shell.

All the soldiers turned pale, panic already setting in, and many began to fall back. Who would dare face this human-shaped dragon head-on?

Once morale broke and troops began fleeing, it would not matter if the enemy forces only had a few thousand troops—Li Shentong alone was worth ten thousand. And without a worthy opponent to block such a vanguard, a top Ranking of Heaven warrior like him on the battlefield was as lethal as a war machine.

Di Muzhi, gritting his teeth, led his officers to encircle Li Shentong, shouting sharply, “Li Shentong, are you truly intent on rebelling?”

If they could suppress him, their numerical superiority could still turn the tide.

Li Shentong cast them a scornful glance. “I am exterminating a villain of the people. How is this rebellion?”

Di Muzhi put on a fierce front, but his words belied his inner fear. “Are you not afraid that His Majesty will come and crush your Divine Brilliance Sect?!”

Anyone who had established a sect or a family lineage was no longer unburdened; they had to consider the well-being of their sect or family. Countless heroes were shackled by such concerns, bending their heads and wasting away.

Li Shentong laughed to the heavens. “The Divine Brilliance Sect has no home, no family, no ties, nor worries. Even if that foolish emperor comes, we shall fight to the death. What is there to fear?!”

With his laughter, both sides closed the distance. Li Shentong clenched his fist once more, unleashing a thunderous strike.

No one knew that in the midst of their exchange, a subtle voice transmission reached Li Shentong’s ear. “Sect Master Li, keep an eye on Di Muzhi’s aide, Xie Ruhai. He is likely Snow Owl.”

A flicker of understanding crossed Li Shentong’s eyes. He let out a boisterous laugh and responded, “Alright!”

A burst of fist energy clashed simultaneously with several weapons.

At that exact moment, a near-imperceptible killing intent struck toward Li Shentong’s side.

However, Li Shentong had not fully committed to the punch he had launched before. It merely dispersed Di Muzhi and his men before transforming into a fierce blast, slamming viciously toward the source of the sneak attack.

A shrill screeching sound rang out, and both sides staggered slightly. Snow Owl, whose ambush had failed and got struck by the far more powerful counterstrike, took the brunt of it, stumbling back two extra steps with a grim expression. “How did you know it was me, Young Hero Zhao?”

It really is Xie Ruhai!

Judging from those words, Zhao Changhe’s voice transmission had been intercepted—the abilities of those on the Ranking of Heaven clearly exceeded Zhao Changhe’s understanding.

Di Muzhi stared at Zhao Changhe in disbelief. He’s a rebel too? But he’s fought at Yanmen and secured Jiangnan, showing pure loyalty to the nation every step of the way!

Standing outside the formation, Zhao Changhe smiled faintly. “Shi Wuding was not someone who engaged in social dealings; his heart was wholly focused on his sword. Yet, multiple sources indicated that disciples of the Sword Hut had extensive interactions throughout Shu—suspicious, to say the least. That obviously could not have been Shi Wuding’s doing. He wasn’t even aware that he

was a pawn in someone else's game. The Sword Hut served as a front for the Snow-Listening Pavilion, and all of this was orchestrated by none other than the master of Snow-Listening Pavilion."

"What does that have to do with me, a mere unassuming aide?" Snow Owl questioned.

"Earlier, I mentioned to Prefectural Governor Di that Snow Owl had killed Shi Wuding. The governor's reaction was one of utter disbelief, though he immediately controlled himself. Fortunately, my eyes are pretty sharp. His reaction shows that he has interacted with Snow Owl and that they're very closely connected. In fact, he should be so close with Snow Owl that they're able to facilitate continued and immediate communication."

"And how are you able to conclude that we're able to communicate in that way?"

"Over a month ago, Wang Daozhong traveled south, and no sooner had he arrived than Shi Wuding came looking for him—clearly at Prefectural Governor Di's request. Although Wang Daozhong traveled at a leisurely pace, joining Li Sian's convoy, considering Prefectural Governor Di's resources..." Zhao Changhe gestured toward the gathered soldiers. "Sending a messenger ahead to overtake Wang Daozhong and accurately locate Shi Wuding to relay information... Well, such precision and coordination are simply far beyond what the governor is capable of. Even if he had a few elites, it's unlikely they would be dispatched urgently for someone like Wang Daozhong, who isn't of such importance."

Di Muzhi remained silent.

"It could only be the Snow-Listening Pavilion that is capable of maintaining such communication, and it's quite possible that Snow Owl was transmitting information directly through some form of mind control. Is that enough?"

Xie Ruhai looked impressed. "No wonder you've come to be renowned as a sharp investigator who has solved several major cases for the Demon Suppression Bureau. You certainly have a keen mind. But even if you deduced Prefectural Governor Di's interactions with the Snow-Listening Pavilion, how did you conclude it was me?"

"Having deduced this much, the aide who's inseparable from Prefectural Governor Di naturally became the primary suspect. What confirmed it for me was Prefectural Governor Di's reaction to Sect Master Li's charge—rather than fleeing, he led his men to face the attack... Where did he get such confidence? There was only one possibility: while he himself could divert Sect Master Li's

attention, he had a hidden ace beside him that was capable of striking fear into Sect Master Li. The only one who fits that bill is you.”

During this brief exchange, the disciples of the Divine Brilliance Sect behind Li Shentong had already reached the gate. Shouts and cries erupted as both sides formally engaged.

Snow Owl slowly drew his sword and pointed it at Li Shentong, speaking coolly, “Sect Master Li, you’ve avoided direct confrontation with me for so long. Why put everything on the line now? It’s not easy to nurture thousands of disciples. If you’re preoccupied with me, how many of them will perish here?”

Li Shentong threw his head back in laughter. “Do you think I’ve been standing here listening to you two talk because I fear you? I was merely giving Young Hero Zhao some face, letting him shine a little more in front of everyone.”

Snow Owl: “...”

Zhao Changhe: “Umm...”

“Now that a rat hiding in the shadows has stepped out into the light, what’s there to fear?” Li Shentong’s muscles bulged, and he roared, “Die!”

He unleashed another thunderous punch, stirring winds and shifting clouds.

The battle between the fifth and the sixth on the Ranking of Heaven unfolded on the southwestern frontier, by the banks of Litang River.

Regardless of who emerged victorious, for the moment, Li Shentong was effectively held at bay. Could the thousands of Divine Radiance Sect disciples prevail against an army of forty thousand?

If Di Muzhi were leading them with no opposition, the answer might still be uncertain.

But Zhao Changhe was also here.

Di Muzhi took a deep breath and turned to Zhao Changhe. “Young Hero Zhao, what exactly is it that you want?”

Chapter 513: All Thanks to Wang Daozhong

“Nothing whatsoever.”

Zhao Changhe could not be bothered to waste words. Dragon Bird suddenly appeared in his hand, and he swung it down with full force.

Swish!

Di Muzhi’s sword flashed with a chilling light, parrying instantly as it thrust toward Zhao Changhe’s chest and side, countering the probing strike completely.

The surrounding guards quickly closed in, their longswords pointed at Zhao Changhe.

Li Shentong might be able to casually punch and send Di Muzhi along with his guards flying, but that was Li Shentong. When it came to Zhao Changhe, Di Muzhi was undoubtedly a formidable opponent.

Di Muzhi shouted in fury, “You were just in Jiangnan eradicating rebellious cults, and now you align yourself with rebels? First Seat Tang has treated you well!”

Zhao Changhe was almost speechless at this, caught between frustration and amusement. “I’m genuinely puzzled. Prefectural Governor Di, do you not understand the concept of a loyal official ridding the nation of traitors?”

“What nonsense!” Di Muzhi bellowed, seething with anger. “The imperial envoy is here. Why can’t we simply resolve this with a proper discussion? Even if you distrust Lord Lu, you and I could take it to the imperial court and let His Majesty decide! How can you side with rebels and draw your blade against your colleagues?”

Zhao Changhe had no patience for such nonsense. He replied lazily, “Don’t you know that I’m a bandit at heart? All these internal protocols of the bureaucracy—none of them makes sense to me, and I genuinely don’t care to understand. In my eyes, you’re simply a villain who oppresses the people. With you gone, the world would become a little more peaceful.”

“You!”

Zhao Changhe lifted his saber, preparing for another strike.

“Young Master Zhao...” Lu Shouyi suddenly spoke from behind. “Given your status, if you truly wished to kill him, there may indeed be some justification.”

Di Muzhi was dumbfounded. “Brother Lu...”

Lu Shouyi sighed. “Brother Di, have you truly never heard the rumors?”

Di Muzhi hesitated and suddenly remembered something. His expression turned complex.

Zhao Changhe was rumored to be the crown prince... This was not something everyone knew. Initially, only a very select few were even aware of this rumor. Later, with whispers and hints from the Cui Clan and the Tang Clan, more people started to hear about it, and Di Muzhi was among them. But the information remained unconfirmed, merely a vague implication.

Besides, Xia Longyuan had proven extraordinarily resilient. People kept claiming that he was dying, yet there he was, hanging on for all these years without any change. Naturally, the discussion about the crown prince had died down, and fewer and fewer people took it seriously.

Now, with Lu Shouyi’s reminder, Di Muzhi remembered the rumor. Judging by Lu Shouyi’s tone, he seems to be leaning toward believing it as well... Furthermore, considering the attitudes of the Cui, Yang, and Tang clans toward Zhao Changhe... he really might just be the crown prince!

If Zhao Changhe were the crown prince, then killing Di Muzhi would not be considered rebellion. It would be considered a covert inspection, rooting out corruption.

But as this thought settled, Di Muzhi found a newfound sense of calm. “So that’s how it is... This humble servant admits guilt before the crown prince... But should Your Highness not consider the bigger picture and prioritize dealing with the rebels? Regardless of my faults, I remain loyal to the Great Xia.”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Is loyalty all that matters?”

Before Di Muzhi could answer, Lu Shouyi spoke up first, “Indeed. In today’s Great Xia, nothing matters more than loyalty.”

Zhao Changhe looked at him coolly. “When you say that, whom do you speak for?”

“His Majesty,” Lu Shouyi replied calmly. “All of the issues within Shu Commandery are known to His Majesty. Li Sian’s report made everything abundantly clear... Yet His Majesty sent me here this time, ostensibly to investigate, but really to indicate support.”

“Because compared to the widespread disloyalty now, loyalty—or rather, identification with the Great Xia—is the most valuable trait?”

“Exactly.”

Di Muzhi revealed a smile, clasping his hands toward the heavens. “His Majesty is wise.”

“There is also a practical concern,” Lu Shouyi added. “Miaojiang is already in turmoil, and that is a given fact. The imperial court currently lacks the means to pacify it. Compared to letting Shu be further destabilized by the Divine Brilliance Sect and other bandits, it’s better for Prefectural Governor Di to atone for his crimes by securing the southwest. If the Miao people break through, and Shu falls into chaos, then even if the Divine Brilliance Sect aligns with the Black Hmong, a thousand miles of fertile land would no longer belong to the empire...”

Zhao Changhe shook his wrist and Dragon Bird hummed. “Don’t lecture me about considering the bigger picture. The bigger picture is something you carve out, not something you tolerate. If I cut down this scum and the Miao emerge, then I’ll just cut down Lei Zhentang as well!”

Clang!

Di Muzhi raised his sword to block.

“This will one day be Your Highness’s empire—please reconsider!” Lu Shouyi pleaded anxiously, but before he could continue, a golden light suddenly flashed across the sky.

* * *

While Zhao Changhe observed Di Muzhi's forward encampment, atop Cangshan in Dali, the second assembly between the tribes of Miaojiang was in progress.

Lei Zhentang was down on his luck.

During the first assembly, he leveraged the people's resentment, using the death of his son at the hands of the Xia as a pretext to rally the tribes together against the Great Xia. Even though tribes like the Bai and Yao did not agree, they were forced to go along with the tide of resentment. And once they killed Xia people, there would have been no turning back.

However, out of nowhere came that meddler Si Laoye, who saw through the lie about Lei Ao's death. With his words, he manipulated the situation, and people like Dao Qingfeng took advantage of it to forcefully establish the Five-Tribe Council.

Originally, Lei Zhentang thought that as long as his side held three seats in the council, things would be fine. But Si Laoye managed to stir things up further, forcing a small tribe of just a few hundred members into the Five-Tribe Council through a trial of combat.

That, Lei Zhentang could have tolerated; as long as they were strong enough, any so-called council was just a farce. But just as talks at the smaller meeting broke down, Lei Zhentang was preparing to attack one side to assert dominance when Shi Wuding turned against him, and Wang Daozhong struck from behind. Lei Zhentang's grand ambitions had not even begun, and he found himself grievously injured, bedridden for an entire month.

The Black Hmong were immediately forced to a standstill, left helplessly watching as the Spirit Tribe rallied the Xia people, gathering them in Taoyuan Town to form a massive force.

A promising situation had descended into complete chaos, and Lei Zhentang could barely foresee how things would unfold.

Damn it, the main culprit is that asshole Wang Daozhong!

Fortunately for him, Xiang Simeng had suddenly disappeared, and Taoyuan Town had fallen quiet.

Then, one day, news arrived that Di Muzhi was leading a massive army southward.

Although Lei Zhentang had yet to fully recover, he knew this was his last chance to unify Miaojiang.

The command of war had to be unified under one leader, and it was in this process that centralizing power was most easily achieved. There was no need to wait for war. Even during the meeting, the Spirit Tribe, now largely composed of Xia refugees, could be met with suspicion and exclusion from the other tribes, rendering Xiang Simeng and Si Laoye's earlier efforts utterly in vain.

By dusk, the tribal leaders had gathered atop Cangshan.

"For this battle, your Spirit Tribe need not participate." Lei Zhentang, brimming with spirit, sat proudly in the alliance leader's seat and spoke to Sisi. "It's not that the Black Hmong do not trust you, but just ask the other tribes, who would dare have your people among our ranks?"

Sisi looked around; even Pan Wan, Dao Qingfeng, and the others, who had previously been on good terms with her, now turned away, avoiding her gaze.

Harboring the Xia people was a double-edged sword. While it might have rapidly swelled her tribe's power overnight, it also drew suspicion and exclusion from the other tribes. Under normal circumstances, it might have gone unspoken, but now, during a conflict with the Xia, it became glaringly obvious.

Sisi seemed unperturbed, her enchanting eyes glimmering as she smiled sweetly. "Then we shall simply stay in Taoyuan."

Lei Zhentang sneered. "Stay in Taoyuan? That is the heart of our territory. What if you collaborate with the Xia people and stab us in the back?"

Sisi smiled. "So, what does Tribal Chief Lei intend?"

Standing behind Lei Zhentang was Lei Ao, who sneered and said, "Of course, we invite the saintess to remain as our guest here on Cangshan."

Sisi glanced at him, her eyes filled with profound disdain. Suddenly, she nodded, smiling. “There is a guest who came from the Great Xia. His family is also rebelling against the Xia, and he came here seeking to coordinate a joint uprising. Someone on our side recognized him, and so we brought him into Taoyuan. Since you do not trust me, why don’t I introduce this guest to join us here at the meeting for a discussion?”

Everyone assumed she was making one last attempt to prove her importance. Pan Wan could not bear to be overly dismissive and said, “Then let us hear what this guest of yours has to say.”

Sisi snapped her fingers, and shortly thereafter, a few young Spirit Tribe members escorted a refined-looking middle-aged man up the mountain.

The figure approaching appeared rather disheveled as if he had been on the run for some time. Yet despite his bedraggled state, he still carried an air of authority—anyone could immediately recognize that he was a top-tier expert, accustomed to being in a position of power.

The newcomer reached the gathering, cupped his hands, and spoke loudly, “I am Wang Daozhong of Langya, greetings to all of...”

Before he could finish speaking, Lei Zhentang slammed the table and rose to his feet. “Wang Daozhong! You dare show your face before me? Prepare to die!”

With a thunderous blow, the table shattered into splinters. Lei Zhentang leaped like an eagle taking flight, lunging straight for Wang Daozhong.

Wang Daozhong’s eyes widened in shock—nightmarish memories of Kunlun flooded his mind.

How had he inexplicably managed to offend yet another figure on the Ranking of Earth?

Have I even met you before?

“No! I’ve never been to Miaojiang. If I’ve somehow offended you, it must have been Zhao Changhe!” By now, Wang Daozhong knew that when it came to such matters, blaming Zhao Changhe was his best option.

Unfortunately, Lei Zhentang was not the type to be easily convinced by words, and he struck out furiously.

Having been relentlessly pursued for days, Wang Daozhong had become as skittish as a startled bird. Realizing that reasoning would not work, he immediately retreated, slipping out from the Black Hmong's encirclement and bolting down the mountain.

Lei Zhentang gave chase, roaring, "You bastard, don't run!"

Wang Daozhong turned, clashing palms with Lei Zhentang with a resounding boom, his voice now tinged with anger, "Do you really think I, Wang Daozhong, am afraid of some Miao savage?"

During his recent days on the run, the internal injuries that had inexplicably plagued him had largely healed, and even Xue Canghai had become wary and given up the chase...

As long as he was not surrounded, how could the dignified Wang Daozhong truly fear some Miao savage?

The two fought their way down the mountain, their fierce energy tearing through the foliage of Cangshan, making for a truly intense battle akin to that between a dragon and tiger.

Soon, they reached the foot of the mountain, and the distant, mirror-like lake^[1] came into view.

Now that they were on level ground and near the water, Wang Daozhong felt even more confident. The mountain had been the Miao's home ground. They excelled in forest warfare, but on open land and by water, it was Wang Daozhong's domain.

Suddenly, Wang Daozhong stopped, turning with a sinister smile. "You barbarians respect strength, but you won't listen to reason until you've been beaten down!"

The Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm surged forth like a tidal wave, displaying an overwhelming, unstoppable might.

Lei Zhentang sneered as he responded, "You people of the Central Plains are always so conceited. You remain self-righteous yet ignorant of mystical arts!"

Suddenly, Wang Daozhong felt a sharp buzz in his head, as if a curse had taken hold of him. The force of his palm strike was diminished by several times.

Lei Zhentang's palm met his at that exact moment.

Unexpectedly, their strikes remained evenly matched!

As it turned out, both had lost strength and their protective auras, and each was shaken to the core. Blood spurted from their mouths, and they flew back, each tumbling backward.

Lei Zhentang had also been struck by a curse at that very moment.

As Lei Zhentang was thrown backward, a deep shock gripped his heart—how could a curse take effect on him, the most renowned great shaman of Miaojiang, whose mastery far surpassed anyone else in the entire region?

He turned his head and saw Sisi suspended in mid-air, her eyes closed. Her hands were forming intricate seals, and she was casting an ancient and powerful curse that was unknown to him.

It's a trap!

The thought flashed through Lei Zhentang's mind just as sword light burst forth from behind a tree nearby.

A sword thrust, strikingly similar to Shi Wuding's, carried a chilling and destructive force aimed directly at Lei Zhentang's back.

It was Han Wubing!

Indeed, it was a trap—a meticulous trap planned by Sisi...

Wang Daozhong himself was clueless, but how could Sisi not know of Lei Zhentang's bitter hatred for Wang Daozhong? Only with Wang Daozhong's appearance could Lei Zhentang be lured away from his tribe alone, and only Wang Daozhong's strength was sufficient to withstand Lei Zhentang head-on.

Amid the fierce clash, Sisi unleashed the shamanic magic she had recently discovered in her ancestral land, while Han Wubing attacked with his sword. Whether they could succeed in killing a Ranking of Earth was uncertain, but at the very least, it should be enough to put Lei Zhentang out of commission for another month.

And by then, who would hold sway over Miaojiang?

Cursed, wounded, and flung into mid-air, Lei Zhentang had no chance to dodge Han Wubing's soul-chasing strike.

"Roar!" With a furious bellow, Lei Zhentang took a direct hit to his back, yet he somehow managed to draw on some energy-draining curse, unleashing a desperate palm strike that repelled both Wang Daozhong and Han Wubing before stumbling back up the mountain.

The Black Hmong tribesmen surged forward, rallying to their chieftain.

At the same time, Sisi slipped through the chaotic ranks of the Black Hmong like the wind, a blood-stained dagger in hand as she departed.

The Black Hmong managed to recover their chief, but then noticed that Lei Ao, the young chief, was lying on his back clutching his throat.

"Young Chief! Young Chief!"

Pitifully, after pretending to be dead for a month, the moment he ceased pretending, he truly died.

Watching the chaos unfold, Wang Daozhong felt as if he was in some kind of weird dream induced by magic plants. He wanted to ask Han Wubing something, but Han Wubing paid him no attention. After assessing the situation and confirming there was no way to penetrate the Black Miao's defenses to finish the job, he simply shook his head and departed.

Wang Daozhong stamped his foot in frustration and ran away as well.

A golden light flashed across the sky.

In the sixth month, Lei Zhentang gathered hundreds of tribes atop Cangshan, intending to unify Miaojiang and declare independence. Wang Daozhong, fleeing persecution, arrived and sought to ally with the Black Hmong, but Lei Zhentang, for reasons unknown, flew into a rage and attacked.

Wang Daozhong fought while retreating, with Lei Zhentang chased after him down the mountain. The Spirit Tribe's Xiang Simeng secretly cast a strange curse, and Han Wubing took advantage of the chaos, launching a sneak attack to severely wound Lei Zhentang on the shore of Jinghu.

The Black Hmong risked their lives to rescue Lei Zhentang, and Xiang Simeng easily slew Lei Ao amidst the chaos. Wang Daozhong then took the opportunity to flee.

The Black Hmong's attempt to unify Miaojiang was thwarted for the second time, Miaojiang once again plunged into turmoil—all thanks to Wang Daozhong.

Although Han Wubing's sneak attack was remarkable, it was insufficient to affect his ranking.

Xiang Simeng, having unlocked the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, advances into the Ranking of Man. The previous substitute due to Frost Hawk's death, who has yet to break through, is pushed out of the rankings.

The Ranking of Man has changed.

Rank 72: Spirit Tribe Saintess Xiang Simeng.

Recalling the times past behind curtains in Yangzhou... My thinness must be because of missing you; and my shyness, for you is shyness still.

Chapter 514: After I Bloom, All Flowers Wither

This was Sisi's first public appearance before the world and also the Spirit Tribe's debut on the global stage.

Against the backdrop of decisive warfare, tribal rivalries, and Ranking of Earth assassination attempts, it was evident to the keen observer that she would stir up storms in Miaojiang, becoming a pivotal force... Yet the commentary that followed was strangely out of place—a tender lament, a love poem steeped in melancholy.

As Sisi read the words displayed in the sky, there was not a trace of triumph nor pride in her expression at ascending the Ranking of Man. Her face flushed red to the tips of her ears. What is the tome even saying... He just left, so how could I have already lost weight from missing him? Also, I'm not shy...

People in Yangzhou were equally bewildered, wondering how the events in distant Miaojiang were related to them whatsoever.

Only Yue Hongling, leading her horse under the moonlight, almost stumbled. For the first time, she felt the unsettling impression that beneath the Heavenly Dao, nothing was hidden. It seemed to be tracing all the way back to the entanglements that began in Yangzhou, summarizing their connections until now...

Could it be that even when we were doing that, the Heavenly Dao was watching?

Both the real and the fake Yue Hongling had the same malicious thought: You best hope we don't reach a high enough level of cultivation, or we'll poke your heavenly eyes out.

Tang Buqi shouted, "Which bastard swore to me that he wouldn't involve more people? What is this?"

Smack!

His aunt gave him a whack on the back of his head. "What are you mumbling about? Zhao Changhe is risking his life in Miaojiang, and you're still doubting him."

Tang Buqi laughed in exasperation. "Even the Tome of Troubled Times has already said that it's all thanks to Wang Daozhong. What does it have to do with Zhao Changhe? Aunt, you're just making things up for him... Risking his life? Was that when he made Xiang Simeng feel like she was in heav—OUCH!"

Tang Wanzhuang retracted her foot, having kicked her nephew aside, and looked up at the last line of the commentary. Her gaze gradually grew misty.

What a beautiful poem.

Dedicated to one's kin, yet now grown thin. Unbound by propriety, yet now feeling shy.

Does the Heavenly Dao really have a spirit? Who wrote these lines?

Meanwhile, Sisi finally tore her gaze away from the sky, took a deep breath, and whistled again.

An eagle flew by, signaling the army that had been lying in ambush outside the mountain. Troops surged forward, filling the entire mountain.

Pan Wan and the others were taken aback. "Saintess Xiang, you..."

Sisi turned and glanced at them, her usual smiling expression turning cold. "Might makes right, does it not? If the Black Hmong can do it, why can't the Spirit Tribe?"

Dao Qingfeng spoke up. "Does the Spirit Tribe wish to become an enemy of all the tribes? You don't seem to be strong enough to take on all of us."

The cold look on Sisi's face quickly disappeared, replaced once more by her characteristic smile. "It would be one thing if others said such words, but you, Chief Dao? This is the best opportunity to eradicate the Black Hmong and end your grudge once and for all."

Dao Qingfeng narrowed his eyes. The White Tribe and the Black Hmong Tribe were indeed long-time enemies. From the start, it was clear that while uniting against the Great Xia was acceptable, allowing the Black Hmong to become the ruler of all Miaojiang was not.

If Miaojiang is destined to have a ruler, then anyone would indeed be better than the Black Hmong. But why can't we be the ones to rise? We're no weaker than the Spirit Tribe.

Just as he was having such thoughts, Sisi's voice floated across the battlefield, seemingly casual yet carrying great weight. "Did everyone see the curse I used just now?"

Dao Qingfeng was startled. "That was..."

“An ancient shamanic technique from the previous era, a secret art that links heaven and man. If everyone works together to eliminate the Black Hmong, I’m willing to share it with everyone. Have you ever wondered why Miaojiang has such few masters in the Profound Mysteries? Perhaps it’s time to reflect on that.”

Before Dao Qingfeng could respond, the leaders of several minor tribes, having heard her offer, were already ecstatic. “Can we trust you?”

Sisi said softly, “Of course.”

“The Black Hmong are unjust! We are willing to pledge our allegiance to the Spirit Tribe as the alliance leader!” the chief of a small tribe shouted passionately. “Follow me to ascend the mountain! Exterminate the Black Hmong!”

Watching as the Spirit Tribe’s forces and members of other tribes surged up Cangshan in a powerful, unified movement, Dao Qingfeng and Pan Wan exchanged a glance. They both knew the Black Hmong were doomed. Not only were the Black Hmong done for, but the entire situation in Miaojiang was now in Sisi’s hands, and no one else could hope to compete.

As they beheld Sisi standing bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun, her beauty otherworldly, an identical thought flashed across the minds of both chieftains. She’s clearly an incredibly cunning and ruthless witch. How could the Tome of Troubled Times described her as delicate and tender? Can someone like her even feel shy?

* * *

As the battle raged on Cangshan, fierce combat was in full swing in front of Di Muzhi’s camp.

Li Shentong and Snow Owl had long since moved away from the center of the battlefield, their fight taking them to unknown locations. Both parties seemed to understand that a duel at the forefront risked injuring their own men.

The Divine Brilliance Sect had another figure on the Ranking of Earth, Elder Shi, but he had not appeared this time, likely holding down the fort at their base.

Meanwhile, the long-absent Situ Xiao suddenly reappeared. He seemed almost too embarrassed to greet Zhao Changhe, choosing instead to dive straight into the fray. He took over his master’s place

at the forefront of the attack, charging into the enemy lines, with the forces of both sides clashing in a chaotic melee.

Meanwhile, within the camp, the commander of the Shu army found himself caught in a direct confrontation.

Zhao Changhe's saber danced wildly as he fought Di Muzhi, exchanging over ten moves in an instant, neither side gaining a clear advantage.

Lu Shouyi stood awkwardly on the sidelines. He did not know how to persuade them to stop, nor was he in a position to intervene.

The practical matters he had brought up were only a pretense to shield Di Muzhi, nothing more than a high-sounding excuse. However, the Tome of Troubled Times had absolutely wiped out any chance of using such an excuse. Lei Zhentang had been wounded once more, and Miaojiang was plunged back into chaos. At least in the short term, they would not be able to unite with Li Shentong...

It seems the crown prince will have to decide for himself. Is it even possible to talk of the rules of the imperial court with him? He just does not recognize them in the slightest, even going so far as to call himself a bandit.

Even when I plainly stated that the emperor ordered that Di Muzhi be protected, he still refused to relent. What the fuck can I do now?

Lu Shouyi thought for a moment, then decisively chose to slip away. Whether Zhao Changhe was truly the crown prince or not, there was no reason for him to get involved. If this ultimately threw Shu into chaos, that was the Xia family's problem, not his—a distant matter for the Lu Clan of Fanyang.

With Lu Shouyi gone, Zhao Changhe felt the pressure lift immediately.

The reason he had been holding back, using only Dragon Bird to fight, was precisely because he sensed that Lu Shouyi's cultivation was also far from insignificant.

Though Lu Shouyi ranked only toward the lower end of the Ranking of Man, somewhere around sixty, that number could not be taken at face value. Di Muzhi had already reached the second layer

of the Profound Mysteries, suggesting that many of these figures on the Ranking of Man who had been there for quite some time had already advanced significantly. Lu Shouyi was very likely near the threshold of the second layer, and his strength was probably comparable to Zhao Changhe's.

It was already a challenge to fight Di Muzhi amid his circle of personal guards. If someone as formidable as Lu Shouyi joined in, Zhao Changhe would be left hoping for Situ Xiao to break through the camp gate sooner rather than later to rescue him. How embarrassing would that be?

So Zhao Changhe had been concealing his strength, biding his time. He was planning to suddenly surprise Lu Shouyi with his newly developed combination of sword and saber. But then, Lu Shouyi just... left.

Zhao Changhe blinked, looking at Di Muzhi—who had been evenly matching his attacks all along—and grinned.

Di Muzhi understood what Zhao Changhe was smiling about. Who did not hold back at first? Until now, Di Muzhi had been cautious due to Zhao Changhe's identity, and with Lu Shouyi acting as a mediator, he had not been fighting in earnest either. But now that Lu Shouyi was gone and things had reached this point, it did not matter whether Zhao Changhe was the crown prince or the emperor; killing him would resolve everything!

Simultaneously, both of them decided to unleash their full power.

Zhao Changhe's arms swelled, his eyes began to turn red, and the strength behind the strikes he launched with Dragon Bird multiplied—more than tenfold compared to before!

Likewise, Di Muzhi's sword sent gales roaring across the battlefield, changing the entire dynamic of the fight. "They say Zhao Changhe only knows three basic moves, and it seems that's true... You have yet to reach the second layer of the profound Mysteries. Today, you will die here!"

In an instant, the entire battlefield was engulfed in a storm of killing intent. The sounds of battle, clashing weapons, and howling winds converged into a cacophonous symphony—a demonic melody that pierced the ears. Sword light flashed like lightning, rushing toward Zhao Changhe's throat.

A master of the second layer of the Profound Mysteries had power such that every motion, every movement, embodied the force of heaven and earth.

Previously, Zhao Changhe had merely sensed their overwhelming power without truly understanding it. But now, he had fully grasped its depth.

With a flick of Dragon Bird, a surge of vicious qi erupted around the battlefield, forming a blood-red barrier that completely dispelled the sonic assault that Di Muzhi had unleashed.

Like a skilled butcher dissecting an ox, Zhao Changhe sliced through it with a single stroke.

At the same time, his saber slashed like lightning along the side of the opponent's sword, then instantly shifted into a horizontal cut aimed at Di Muzhi's throat.

As Zhao Changhe pushed forward with his saber, the world fell silent—nature stilled as though nothing else existed but the light of this single strike, emerging from the very act of creation.

Hell on Earth!

Clang!

As the sword and saber clashed, Di Muzhi felt a jolt of terror.

Zhao Changhe clearly had not yet broken through to the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, yet his comprehension, power, speed, technique, and vision all exhibited the complete mastery of someone who had.

He's just a step away! If he's able to command the surrounding vicious qi as though he's moving his own arm... Forget it. What's the point of thinking about that? There's no way he's going to survive this combined assault!

Indeed, Di Muzhi was not dueling Zhao Changhe one-on-one. He was at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, as well as ranked first on the Ranking of Man, and he was fighting someone ranked thirty-seventh. Yet even then, he did not fight alone.

In the instant their weapons clashed, several long swords formed into the Sword Hut Sword Formation around Zhao Changhe, each aimed at a vital point.

Facing both Di Muzhi and this sword formation simultaneously, it seemed as though he had fallen into an inescapable trap, a death sentence.

But a smile appeared on Zhao Changhe's face. Just as Dragon Bird clashed with Di Muzhi's sword, his left hand moved, suddenly bursting forth with sword light.

This was not the sword light of Di Muzhi's guards, but rather the dazzling gleam of Dragon Emperor.

Swish!

The sword light split into nine, completely different from the brutal force of Dragon Bird. The precise sword qi struck simultaneously at the swords that made up the surrounding formation, each bolt so meticulously targeted that it seemed as if each strike had been executed by another person entirely.

It was One Sword Fells Nine Geese of the Luoxia Mountain Village Sword Formation, the very move that Zhao Changhe used when he first met Yue Hongling.

He even had the extra strength to split off a thread of sword qi to sneakily jab at Di Muzhi's abdomen.

Di Muzhi's expression grew graver. He twisted his sword and also threw multiple strikes, attacking Zhao Changhe's left and right wrists.

Hmph, it's impossible to coordinate such opposing intents perfectly. There's bound to be a fatal flaw!

But the saber in Zhao Changhe's right hand suddenly turned gentle, sweeping across to slash the throat of a guard on his right.

Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night.

Meanwhile, the sword in his left hand rose like a tempest, waves crashing onto shore, the surging waves of a raging ocean.

Sea-Suppressing Sword Art!

Clang!

Di Muzhi's scattered sword light was completely suppressed, while on his right side, blood sprayed out as the guard fell with wide eyes, too shocked to comprehend why someone had died in the middle of a battle where their commander clearly had the upper hand.

Di Muzhi roared in fury, "Zhao Changhe!"

A rush of intense rage filled his heart, and a torrent of vicious qi seemed to overwhelm his mind. His vision turned red, the entire world around him transforming into an expanse of blood.

Di Muzhi realized something was wrong.

Have I fallen into a trap?

From afar, a deep sigh seemed to echo in his ears. "Yes, that's right. You're angry, aren't you? I'm angry, too. The heads of those Xia villagers, the cries of those innocent women... You claim loyalty to the Great Xia? But what is the Great Xia? The Great Xia is the people of the Great Xia."

Who is spouting this fucking nonsense?

This thought flashed through Di Muzhi's mind, but the next moment, he found his vision filled with an upturned sky, as if the heavens themselves had been inverted. A headless body was spraying blood skyward, torn apart, dying a brutal, dismembered death. It was an utterly gruesome death to behold.

Bloodied Mountains and Rivers.

"The vicious qi of the battlefield, your rage, your violence, your killing intent... My saber drinks blood, drawing in the malice..."

“The so-called mastery is like detaching oneself, looking down from a high vantage point, overlooking all beings as ants.

“How could such a perspective ever be consumed by vicious qì?

“When the eye that gazes behind becomes one that gazes from above... The so-called path to the heavens is truly an inhuman path.”

Zhao Changhe—the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

He slowly turned his head, the blood-red hue in his eyes fading quickly.

The surrounding guards looked as though they had seen a ghost, turning to flee.

A saber flashed and several heads flew simultaneously, their souls following their prefectural governor to the underworld.

It was only at this moment that the battlefield understood what had happened, and a shout suddenly erupted, “The prefectural governor is dead! The prefectural governor is dead!”

“That bastard is dead! What are we still fighting for then?”

“Turn around and fight them instead!”

“Take down that vanguard general! He’s from the Di Clan! Don’t let him get away!”

Situ Xiao stared dumbfounded as the tens of thousands of troops from Shu fell into chaos, turning against their leaders without a moment’s hesitation.

Zhao Changhe was also looking for the traitorous vanguard general. He had just spotted him attempting to flee on horseback, but before Zhao Changhe could catch up and kill him, a group of disheveled soldiers dragged him off his horse, hacking him into a bloody pulp. “Die, you piece of shit!”

Everyone had gone mad!

Situ Xiao stopped his attack and turned to Zhao Changhe, who looked right back at him.

After a long while, Situ Xiao suddenly smiled. “The resentment of the people of Shu is like a dam that has broken—it will inevitably flood this commandery. I never thought you’d stand on our side... Damn, I’m not as good as you.”

Zhao Changhe gave no response. Holding Di Muzhi’s severed head, he strode forward, hanging it above the camp gate.

From afar, Snow Owl’s deep voice echoed, “Zhao Changhe, I will remember you.”

Zhao Changhe calmly replied, “Good. I will be waiting.”

A golden light flashed in the sky.

In the sixth month, Di Muzhi led his army into Miaojiang. Li Shentong personally led three thousand disciples of the Divine Brilliance Sect, launching a surprise attack on the camp.

Zhao Changhe exposed Snow Owl’s identity. Snow Owl, the master of Snow-Listening Pavilion, appeared before the world for the first time and fought Li Shentong on the banks of the Litang River.

Di Muzhi and his personal guards surrounded Zhao Changhe, but Zhao Changhe used the battle to hone himself, breaking through into the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. He then slew Di Muzhi amidst the encirclement, hanging his head upon the gate of their camp, and annihilating his followers.

Snow Owl fled, Shu’s forces mutinied, and Li Shentong absorbed the remaining soldiers, advancing toward Chengdu. The rebel forces across Shu rose up, responding to the call of the Divine Brilliance Sect. Cities collapsed, officials were executed, and so too were the nobles. The entirety of Shu plunged into chaos.

Zhao Changhe ascends to the top of the Ranking of Man, with no one left to challenge him.

Rank 1: Blood Asura Zhao Changhe!

Waiting for autumn to come on the eighth of the ninth month; after I bloom, all flowers wither! [1]

When it came to major events, the Tome of Troubled Times often contained a certain ambiguity in its phrasing, making it difficult to determine its exact meaning.

This line was from a well-known subversive poem and did not necessarily imply anything specific would happen on the eighth of the ninth month.

It seemed to be referring to Li Shentong sparking an upheaval in Shu, with countless heroes rising in response, the anger of the people who had long been suppressed erupting. The bones of nobility were trampled, the flowers in their gardens left to wither.

And it also seemed to hint at Zhao Changhe's meteoric rise.

In just two years, he had reached the top of the Ranking of Man. Like a young dragon soaring over the world, his vibrance caused all other flowers to pale in comparison, all opposition falling silent.

Chapter 515: The World of Troubled Times

Humans tend to interpret things based on their literal meaning. Whether the names of Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man had a special significance or not, people would inevitably interpret them literally.

Most people understood the Ranking of Hidden Dragons to refer to emerging talents, while the Ranking of Man was for mortal masters. The Ranking of Heaven represented those who were beyond human, legendary figures in the clouds. And the Ranking of Earth fell somewhere in between—those on the path to the heavens.

No matter how much people's perception of the Rankings of Heaven and Earth may be exaggerated, if Cui Wenjing and others knew that they were considered legends, they might not know whether to laugh or cry. But to the world, this was reality. Even Zhao Changhe, back when he was still naive, thought that Vermillion Bird was a god.

In other words, the top of the Ranking of Man represented the strongest “human.” Above that, one was no longer considered just a person.

Thus, reaching the top of the Ranking of Man granted one an absurdly high status in the jianghu.

At least, that used to be the case. However, due to the deaths of three of the figures on the Ranking of Earth in the past two years and the frequent changes at the top of the Ranking of Man, its once sacred aura had faded. Zhao Changhe’s rise to the top was not even as sensational as when he became First Hidden Dragon. After all, he kept climbing ranks so often that people had almost become numb to it, feeling like this day was inevitable.

“The Tome of Troubled Times just keeps inflating his reputation beyond measure!” Tang Buqi grumbled. “Every time, it praises him as either first-class or a flower-slayer. It might as well just call him the king of flowers!”

This was in the mansion in the capital. The Tang Clan had indeed moved out of Gusu, unwilling to live atop the powder keg that was the Sword Emperor’s tomb. Unfortunately, Tang Buqi still had to keep an eye on the situation in Jiangnan. His visit to the capital actually had another purpose.

Xuan Chong, who was a guest at Tang Buqi’s residence, listened to his complaints and smiled, shaking his head without expressing any agreement.

In fact, the Tome of Troubled Times had similarly high praise for Yue Hongling and Han Wubing before. Zhao Changhe received the highest acclaim simply because he truly kept coming in first. There was nothing else to say about it. Xuan Chong remained calm, unconcerned by it.

In fact, comparing him to flowers every time almost seemed to have a subtly malicious undertone.

To Xuan Chong, however, there was a more pressing issue at hand—one that Tang Buqi had yet to mention. So Xuan Chong brought it up himself. “Who could have expected Li Shentong to actually rebel... And this time, Zhao Changhe is on the rebels’ side? There’s such a serious matter to consider, yet you’re fixated on that instead?”

Tang Buqi was silent for a moment before speaking slowly, “My aunt hasn’t commented on it, so what stance could I possibly take?”

“First Seat Tang hasn’t said anything?”

“What could she say? Li Sian’s report clearly states that the people of Shu have suffered under Di Muzhi for too long, and even the Miaojiang uprising could be considered the result of Di Muzhi pushing them too far. My aunt had a premonition back then—Zhao Changhe wouldn’t be able to endure it. No authority can sway him.”

“...”

“To be fair, he’s always said he’s more inclined toward the rebels, and he has never hidden that. Despite that, he’s put up with it, fighting against the northern barbarians and the cultists. We can’t really expect more from him.” Tang Buqi sighed. “My aunt was just seeing her dream within reach, only for it to suddenly vanish. Who knows how it’ll all be cleaned up in the future.”

Xuan Chong’s lips twitched. Cleaned up? The way Tang Buqi phrased it made it sound as if First Seat Tang had been completely taken advantage of...

Tang Buqi took a sip of his wine and sighed. “I think she doesn’t even have the heart to focus on the southwest anymore. This Great Xia, while patched up here and there, is suddenly leaking all over the place. It’s already beyond saving.”

Xuan Chong understood what he meant. This time, Tang Buqi’s visit to the capital was for precisely that reason.

Imperial Noble Consort Huangfu Qing and Empress Wang collaborated for the first time to push forward a significant reform: abolishing the grain transport by canal and shifting to maritime transport.

This was the most important aspect of the collaboration between the Four Idols Cult and the Wang Clan. After a year of secret planning and countless backroom deals, they had finally managed to bring the matter to the imperial court.

The livelihoods of a million canal workers were at stake, and the reaction of the Cao Gang[1] was almost certain.

The Cao Gang was not a simple group. It was connected to countless official forces along the transport route. Essentially, this meant that not only the Canal Gang but also numerous officials would rise in opposition. Their reaction would shake the very foundation of Great Xia’s rule.

But there were a few subtleties to this matter.

First, in the long run, maritime transport was beneficial and inevitably needed to be implemented. There had always been visionary officials advocating for overseas exploration. If this reform had taken place during the peak of the Great Xia, and if they had coordinated well with the canal transport system, it might not have harmed the canal's interests. The two transport systems could have coexisted peacefully.

Unfortunately, during these troubled times, it was being forcefully pushed through. Huangfu Qing had even intentionally made things difficult, so an ideal outcome was out of the question.

Secondly, the reform was beneficial for the Tang Clan. As a coastal aristocratic family, the Tang Clan actually supported it.

Now, Tang Wanzhuang had a major headache. Outside, she was constantly butting heads with Huangfu Qing, almost to the point of brawling. Meanwhile, at home, her family—from the elders to the rest—were all covertly urging her to agree. Tang Wanzhuang felt like her head was about to explode, and lately, she did not even want to leave the house.

Tang Buqi had come to the capital because the Tang Clan was in an uproar. As an important figure stationed in the southeast, he naturally had to participate in the family meetings. Besides, Wan Dongliu of the Cao Gang was his friend, which made his feelings even more complicated.

Of course, Tang Buqi had no idea that Wan Dongliu, as the Water Worm of Zhen, had already intended to rebel as per the Four Idols Cult's plan. This move was simply to force his father, Wan Tianxiong, to make up his mind.

Tang Buqi was similarly unaware that it was Zhao Changhe who suggested this plan to Huangfu Qing. Otherwise, his worldview might have collapsed completely.

“Venerable, was this plan really Zhao Changhe's idea?” Xia Chichi asked the masked Vermillion Bird in disbelief. They were in the Four Idols Cult's capital villa, where Zhao Changhe had once stayed. “Such a scheme to throw the nation into turmoil—how could it have come from him?”

Vermillion Bird, in a very good mood, had her legs crossed and was lazily reclining on a soft couch. “Oh? You seem to know him very well now, huh? You know, he’s our Four Idols Cult’s Fire Pig of Shi. Isn’t it natural for him to offer his strategies to our holy cult?”

Xia Chichi mumbled, “He wasn’t the Fire Pig of Shi back then... it was that seductive imperial noble consort who turned him into one.”

The aforementioned seductive imperial noble consort’s good mood dissipated right then and there. She eyed her disciple from head to toe, wondering whether to assign her another book to copy out.

However, she could not help but be amazed. Xia Chichi’s talent was truly remarkable... Even back when she could simultaneously resonate with both the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, it was clear that her talent was superior to that of Vermillion Bird and Lady Three. Vermillion Bird had not expected that after sending her to hone her skills overseas, she would actually return on the verge of reaching the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

And she’s only how old?

But her astonishment did not last long before being overshadowed by a report from the Tome of Troubled Times. Zhao Changhe had already reached the second layer, surpassing even Chichi.

Damn, that idiot is the real miracle. Although he’s a little older than Chichi, how long has he even been cultivating? Vermillion Bird felt that this exceeded her understanding of martial arts entirely. If it were anyone else, she would have captured them and dissected them by now...

However, since it was Zhao Changhe, her feelings instead turned into admiration for her man.

Then, she glanced at her own disciple, and suddenly, everything about her seemed irritating.

Xia Chichi, meanwhile, continued to express her understanding of Zhao Changhe. “Changhe must have had more in mind than just rebellion when proposing this plan. There has to be something else. He probably thought that this was a beneficial direction that could be coordinated with the Cao Gang... but in the current circumstances, it just so happens that it can be used to force Wan Tianxiong to rebel.”

Vermillion Bird gave her a sidelong glance and said after a long pause, “Yes, you’re right about everything.”

Xia Chichi sensed that something was off with the atmosphere and thus decided to stay quiet.

Vermillion Bird did not know how to catch her in the wrong. She could not exactly criticize her for stepping with her left foot first, so she simply said, “You’ve just returned from your trip overseas—why ask so much? Tell me what you’ve discovered during your time away.”

“There really are people living overseas, but they’re not of different races or civilizations as we imagined. Instead, they’re Xia people who fled the wars long ago to make a living... They also worship some sea god, but it’s difficult to determine whether such a deity truly exists or if it’s just a spontaneous belief formed by coastal residents out of fear and reverence of the ocean.”

If Zhao Changhe heard this, it would further solidify his worldview that this was a proper xuanhuan world inspired by Chinese culture and history, rather than a complete Earth-like world with Westerners and all.

This discovery might be meaningful for Zhao Changhe, but it was of no use to the Four Idols Cult. Xia Chichi’s voyage served two purposes: to hone her will as the Azure Dragon and to investigate the so-called Sea Tribe, in preparation for the inevitable clash with Wang Clan. Yet while she had succeeded in the first goal, she had found nothing for the second.

Of course, Xia Chichi had not traveled very far. Four Idols Cult would never let their saintess embark on voyages that might take months or even a year—what if something happened? They were prepared for a lack of findings.

Given the importance of the current situation, Vermillion Bird temporarily let go of her desire to find fault in Xia Chichi. She frowned for a while before murmuring to herself, “Knowing oneself and the enemy is paramount... I’m not afraid of Wang Daoning, but that sinister aura back then. If we don’t get to the bottom of the matter with the Sea Tribe, we cannot rashly turn against the Wang Clan.”

Xia Chichi snickered. “Wang Daozhong is now a loyal servant of the Great Xia. He pushed back He Lei, defeated Maitreya, went to jail for false accusations, and then traveled across the country to suppress the Miao rebellion. It’s almost enough to move me to tears... Venerable, do you think the Wang Clan might just follow this path and not rebel after all?”

Although Vermillion Bird knew that she was joking, she answered seriously, “There is no turning back for the Wang Clan. The Tome of Troubled Times clearly stated Wang Daozhong’s desire to

ally with the Black Hmong, turning all of his supposedly loyal acts into a joke. Anyone with half a brain now knows why Wang Daozhong went to the southwest. Previously, the Wang Clan's rebellious intentions were evident, but since they didn't take action, the imperial court could feign ignorance. But now, that is no longer possible. Tang Wanzhuang had a secret meeting with Xia Longyuan last night, arguing that they must take the offensive and uproot the Wang Clan's influence in the court."

"The imperial noble consort knows all this? Then what... What did Xia Longyuan say?"

Vermillion Bird replied with a stern face, "I don't know."

Xia Chichi pursed her lips and muttered, "As expected from the Tome of Troubled Times... In other words, whether the abolition of canal transport succeeds, and whether the Cao Gang rebels, the Wang Clan will inevitably rebel. Meanwhile, Li Shentong has captured Shu, Xiang Simeng is overseeing Miaojiang, and Wan Tianxiong rises from Jianghuai[2]. The chaos caused by Maitreya in Jiangnan has not even been resolved yet, and now flames of unrest are breaking out all across the land. Tang Wanzhuang can no longer patch things up... This is truly the beginning of troubled times."

There was a hint of regret in her tone.

Vermillion Bird cast her a glance, also feeling a bit conflicted.

If Chichi were the true princess, these emotions would be beyond words.

Suddenly, she was very curious—When Zhao Changhe takes his first step out of the closed-off Bashu and sees the entire world in such turmoil, what would he feel?

"What would he think?" Xia Chichi murmured.

Vermillion Bird sighed. "You'll find out soon enough."

Xia Chichi looked up at her in surprise, only to see Vermillion Bird smile faintly. "If you want to see him, just wait here. If I'm not mistaken, he will definitely be coming to the capital next."

At the foot of Mount Emei, in the inn where Zhao Changhe once spent a day lifting weights.

Situ Xiao hugged a wine jar, gulping down from it with gusto. He claimed that he was going to treat Zhao Changhe to a drink, only to end up getting himself half-drunk first.

Zhao Changhe was speechless and ignored him, focusing instead on secretly pouring wine into his own gourd. He had been too embarrassed to ask Sisi for some wine to fill it, and the gourd had been empty for about a month now...

To be fair, this was the first time in the past year that, after a great battle and rising in the rankings, Zhao Changhe had not ended up as injured as a dying dog. The fact that he could actually come out to drink with friends was a significant improvement for him.

“Hey.” Situ Xiao finally put down the wine jar after drinking his fill. “Why aren’t you drinking?”

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. “I’ve never been a drunkard like you, okay?”

“If you’re not a drinker, then why carry a wine gourd?”

“Just because I enjoy a few sips every now and then doesn’t mean I’m a drunkard. Are you a binary thinker or something? Which forum did you graduate from?”

Situ Xiao: “?”

He did not understand the words coming out of Zhao Changhe’s mouth.

Zhao Changhe replied honestly, “Actually, it’s because carrying a saber on the shoulder and a wine gourd at the waist looks really cool. It fits the image of a wanderer in the jianghu very much.”

Situ Xiao laughed in disbelief. This is the powerhouse outshining everyone in his generation? What a joke.

He replied sourly, “You’ve even stolen my Drunken Steps, and yet you claim not to be a drunkard.”

Although he said it jokingly, he really was sour about Zhao Changhe learning his technique.

Zhao Changhe responded, “Hey, being friends doesn’t mean I’ll let you talk nonsense. I could sue you for slander. Back in Langya, I mimicked the Drunken Steps to put on an act, but I didn’t actually learn it, okay? How about you teach me? You already taught me the Wind and Lightning Palm, so why not this as well?”

Situ Xiao couldn’t help but laugh at his shameless attitude. “You really are... You’re already at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, the top ranker on the Ranking of Man! I should be the one asking you for pointers, shouldn’t I? How do you still have the face to ask me to teach you anything?”

“Why do you sound so sour?”

Did he figure it out? Situ Xiao put on a sulky face and kept quiet.

“I can teach you something in return.” Zhao Changhe casually grabbed some paper and a brush from the inn counter, and quickly wrote something down before handing it to Situ Xiao. “Though I hardly ever used the Wind and Lightning Palm... Well, consider this an exchange.”

Back then, Situ Xiao had been helping a friend, happily teaching Zhao Changhe when he saw he wanted to learn about fist and palm arts.

This time, however, the roles were clearly reversed—it was Zhao Changhe helping him.

Situ Xiao, with a bellyful of thoughts about how times had changed, took the paper and glanced at it. Instantly, he spat out the wine in his mouth.

He frantically turned his head to avoid spitting on the paper, twisting his neck so much it nearly broke, all while coughing uncontrollably.

The paper revealed a body cultivation technique that granted rapid recovery.

If Zhao Changhe’s Blood Asura body was highly aggressive and conflicted with the indestructibility path of Situ Xiao’s Divine Brilliance Sect, making it difficult to integrate, then the healing aspect of

the body cultivation technique on the paper he had just given Situ Xiao seemed almost tailored for the Divine Brilliance Sect. There was absolutely no conflict.

This was not merely an exchange—it was an incredible opportunity that would make the entire Divine Brilliance Sect overjoyed, something worthy of being listed as a core sect secret!

“You... cough, cough... Do you know what level this body cultivation technique is?”

“I know, it’s at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.”

“And you’re just handing it to me like a glass of wine?”

“Why not?” Zhao Changhe said, “I developed this on my own, so I can give it to whoever I want.”

Situ Xiao fell silent, then sighed after a long pause. “If I remember right, you’re supposed to hate rebels. But it doesn’t seem that way at all. In fact, you even seem more inclined to it.”

Zhao Changhe looked at him, puzzled. “I thought you were acting strange, but this was all it was?”

“If paths diverge, even the best of friends can become strangers.”

“But who told you I hate rebellion? Just look at Di Muzhi. Staying under his rule for so long without rebelling, that’s what I’d look down on.”

Situ Xiao was stunned.

Could it be that the rumors we heard were wrong? Was the Wang Clan’s attitude towards him in Langya fake too? Is he really not the crown prince?

Situ Xiao had heard some of Zhao Changhe’s conversation with Di Muzhi and Lu Shouyi while attacking the camp gates. He had overheard Lu Shouyi mention that protecting Di Muzhi was Xia Longyuan’s intention... The truth was that the Great Xia’s current state was a direct result of Xia Longyuan’s actions.

If you rebel against Di Muzhi's rule, doesn't that mean you're rebelling against Xia Longyuan and the Great Xia as well?

Zhao Changhe had never shown any deference to Xia Longyuan—and he killed without hesitation as if proving his stance with action. The irony was almost laughable.

Situ Xiao, lost in these thoughts, suddenly heard Zhao Changhe speak up. "I do have a question, though."

Situ Xiao collected himself. "Go ahead."

"Now that your master holds power over Bashu, will he change?"

Situ Xiao knew what he was asking and fell silent.

When one first rises to power, they may not have grand ambitions, but once they establish authority, who knows if they would start having different thoughts? Situ Xiao could not make such a promise on behalf of his master. However, the Divine Brilliance Sect had some confidence in the fact that they were all bachelors with no descendants, so they were less likely to develop a dynastic mindset.

One thing Situ Xiao could confidently guarantee was that his master absolutely had no interest in women...

"Instead of worrying about whether I might change, you should think about what Xia Longyuan will do with rebellion erupting everywhere," a voice came from outside—it was Li Shentong. "I rebelled knowing full well Xia Longyuan might come for my head. I've never cared about what comes afterward."

Zhao Changhe stood up. "Weren't you supposed to be leading your forces to Chengdu, senior?"

"I sent Junior Brother Shi," Li Shentong said casually. "You think I actually enjoy fighting? I'd rather drink."

He strolled in, grabbed his disciple's wine bowl, and downed all its contents in one go.

Situ Xiao reached out pitifully, his expression full of heartache but not daring to say a word.

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Bang!

Li Shentong finished his drink with satisfaction, set down the bowl, and looked at Zhao Changhe with undisguised appreciation. "I didn't manage to complete the task you entrusted to me. I feel a bit embarrassed now."

Zhao Changhe replied, "Senior, are you referring to my request to look after Hongling?"

"Yes... I sent people to search, but they couldn't find her. I couldn't help at all."

"That's not your fault. Hongling was in Miaojiang. I ran into her myself. The fact that you remembered it is proof of your trustworthiness."

"The fact remains that I failed to complete the task you entrusted me with. I owe you one. You can ask for another favor," Li Shentong said with a hint of meaning. "As long as it's not asking me to surrender to Xia Longyuan."

Zhao Changhe paused for a moment. "What about if I asked you to surrender to someone else?"

Li Shentong smiled. "You?"

Zhao Changhe waved it off. "I'm just a wanderer of the jianghu... Senior, you must be joking."

Li Shentong said slowly, "It all depends on who the other person is... As it stands, unless Tang Wanzhuang herself becomes the empress, no one else is worthy."

Zhao Changhe's eyes widened. There really are people out there thinking along these lines? Tang Wanzhuang as empress? That's almost too beautiful to imagine.

The implication in Li Shentong's words seemed to be that Zhao Changhe was not ready now, though he hinted at the young man's potential for the future... but he would not say that directly. For him to come here and speak of such things was significant on its own.

Li Shentong continued, "Perhaps you've been in Miaojiang too long and you aren't aware of the current upheaval. A few days ago, the Wang Clan and Huangfu Clan jointly proposed abolishing the canal transport and shifting to maritime routes. No matter what power plays lie behind it, it's certain that chaos will follow. The Wang Clan will undoubtedly raise its banner, and Wan Tianxiong, who has roamed the Jianghuai region for so many years, won't just sit back. The Tang Clan has already established itself strongly in Jiangnan... If they intend to compete for the throne, it's not impossible. So wipe off that surprised expression."

Zhao Changhe felt his heart skip a beat. So it's finally come to this... The fact that this proposal was his own idea made his feelings about it quite complicated.

Situ Xiao clicked his tongue. "This treacherous plan to replace the canal with maritime routes— whoever came up with it must be an utterly heartless strategist born without a conscience..."

Zhao Changhe shot him a sidelong glance, half thinking of taking back the cultivation technique he had just given him.

"Regardless of the turmoil, the real crux is Xia Longyuan's stance. Without him, it's all just some play on a stage." Li Shentong turned and walked away. "Alright, I won't disturb you two anymore..."

Zhao Changhe no longer felt like drinking.

He almost wished he could grow wings to fly directly to the capital to see Tang Wanzhuang... and to see Xia Longyuan.

No, actually, I should go see Cui Wenjing first.

He had once promised Old Cui that after returning from the southwest, he would marry Yangyang. But with the world now in such upheaval, if the Wang Clan raised a rebellion, they would likely advance in one of two directions—west toward Puyang or south toward Xuzhou. If they move west, would Old Cui even still be in the mood to talk about marriage?

Chapter 517: Clouds Stir in All Directions

“Has he left?”

In the main hall of the Divine Brilliance Sect, Li Shentong stood with his hands behind his back, gazing silently at the statue of the sect’s founding ancestor. Outside, Situ Xiao, who was usually carefree and rowdy, dared not make a sound. He answered honestly, “As soon as you left, he left too. He didn’t even drink. It was as if he was standing on burning coals.”

“He gave you something. Did you return the gesture?”

Situ Xiao sighed with a bit of helplessness. “Yes, I did, but he didn’t even look at it. He just stuffed it into his pocket.”

Li Shentong was visibly stunned for a moment, then laughed aloud. “Interesting. But it doesn’t matter. What we give is ours to give. If he tosses it in the trash, that’s his business. The Divine Brilliance Sect owes nothing to no one.”

What Situ Xiao had given Zhao Changhe was the Divine Brilliance Sect’s core body cultivation manual. It was the very foundation of the sect.

He had clearly given it to repay the body cultivation technique that Zhao Changhe had casually gifted him. It was a way to settle debts. Whether Zhao Changhe could make use of the body cultivation technique was irrelevant—the value was in the gesture.

A secret art at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries was casually given away, and a sect’s foundational cultivation technique was handed over in return. Neither side seemed to care much about it.

“He talks about carrying a saber on his shoulder and a wine gourd on his waist to fit in with the jianghu... He has a heart for chivalry, but unfortunately, that’s not his path to walk. He stands at the very center of the storm, and he’s also someone with a strong sense of responsibility and deep loyalty. To live a carefree life in the jianghu is impossible for him.” Li Shentong chuckled. “But the image he described does suit you quite well.”

Situ Xiao was silent for a moment, then sighed. “Is that still even possible now?”

“Why not?”

“With my status...”

“The hell status are you talking about? The young lord of Shu?”

“Uh, that’s not what I meant. I mean, others might think... well, maybe not...”

He was already the young leader of the strongest sect, and becoming the young lord of Shu did not make any difference in the jianghu. Those who respected him would continue to do so, and those who wished to be his enemies would still oppose him.

The only difference was that the Great Xia officials, who were once friendly, had now become adversaries. But with chaos erupting all over the Great Xia, these officials were unlikely to be able to do much.

Thinking about this, Situ Xiao scratched his head. Despite everything that’s happened, rebelling doesn’t seem to have changed much at all?

Seeing his master’s attitude, it truly seemed that there was no difference. He neither fought in the war nor managed affairs—just like always, he was staying in the main hall, just as he had done in the past as the leader of the Divine Brilliance Sect.

Li Shentong suddenly asked, “Do you know why I tolerated that scoundrel Di Muzhi for so long?”

“Wasn’t it because of Snow Owl?”

“That was a reason, but not the reason. That was just one factor among many. And to be fair, that guy is formidable. I thought that a rat hiding in the gutter would be crushed like a bug once exposed to the sun, but it turns out it’s not that easy. In direct combat, I really could crush him like a bug, but if he wants to flee, I can’t even catch up, much less stop him. He’s not sixth on the Ranking of Heaven for nothing. The Tome of Troubled Times didn’t put him there without reason.”

“If someone like him were to attempt an assassination...”

Li Shentong sneered. “He wouldn’t dare. Even if he can escape ten or a hundred times, as long as I injure him once, I’ll be able to squeeze the life out of him. Someone who’s used to hiding in the shadows won’t willingly put himself at risk.”

Situ Xiao nodded and did not bother continuing to ask “what if he tries to assassinate me in the future?” If the figure ranked sixth on the Ranking of Heaven stooped to such tactics, losing all dignity just to drag his reputation through the mud, it may just end up as entertainment for others.

Instead, he was more interested in the other reasons his master had mentioned for tolerating Di Muzhi. “If Snow Owl is only one of the reasons, then what are the others?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Situ Xiao responded promptly, “Yes.”

“Well, first, both Yuxu and I suspect that it’s not that Xia Longyuan lacks the power to control the chaos, nor is it that he’s lazy or indifferent. It’s more like... he’s watching a show. There’s a high probability that Xia Longyuan actually wants this outcome.”

Situ Xiao was stunned. “Why? This is his own empire!”

“That is correct, and we don’t know the reason behind it, but it’s the only explanation that truly makes sense. Anything else is difficult to explain,” Li Shentong said calmly. “And if that’s the case, then he’s been waiting for me to rebel... So, should I play into his hands?”

Situ Xiao declared loudly, “Do it. What’s there to hesitate about?”

Li Shentong finally turned away from the statue of the ancestor and looked at his disciple. “Why?”

Situ Xiao said, “If our martial arts can’t protect those we love or cut off the heads of those we despise, then what’s the point of our training? If we think it’s the right thing to do, we should do it—what does it matter what that Xia emperor wants? It has nothing to do with us.”

A rare smile appeared on Li Shentong’s usually grim face, and he patted his disciple’s shoulder. “As for the second reason... You and I can kill the governor and throw every noble family in Shu into the Jinsha River. But then what? Do you know how to make life better for the people of Shu?”

Situ Xiao, who had just been full of bravado, opened his mouth, but it took him a long time to mutter, “Three-legged frogs are hard to find, but are capable officials really that rare? We protect the land and the people, so we just need to find competent people to handle the rest. We keep things under control, and if they step out of line, we can just deal with it, right?”

“Are you sure?”

“Most... most likely!”

“Alright, then you’re in charge of that.”

Situ Xiao: “???”

“Don’t say I set you up. I’ve got more important things to handle.”

“Like standing here looking at the ancestor’s statue?”

Li Shentong raised his hand, and Situ Xiao quickly shrunk down, clearly well-aware of the power behind it.

“Now that rebellions are breaking out everywhere, how many are true rebels and how many are just taking advantage of the chaos? How many are willing to ally with us, and how many want to establish their own territories? It’s easy to talk about rebellion, but how many troubles follow one after another? If you want to handle those matters instead, we can switch.”

Situ Xiao thought for a long time. “Let’s switch.”

“Alright, then you take charge, and I’ll be your support.” Li Shentong slowly left the main hall and sighed softly. “Zhao Changhe isn’t the only one who desires a chivalrous life but can’t have it.”

Situ Xiao’s eyelids twitched. What kind of master fights his own disciple for the job of handling these matters? Good thing I’m quick-witted.

In the sixth month, the Divine Brilliance Sect's Elder Shi Tieshi led the sect's forces to capture Chengdu.

Situ Xiao swept across Bashu, defeating almost two hundred bandits and rebel leaders with his sword and subduing over twenty local rebel forces. He established his dominance over the southwest, and Shu gradually found peace.

As the Tome of Troubled Times did not record these "trivial" battles, no one knew how many injuries this man had sustained or how close he had come to death.

The one that did record these trivial battles was the Demon Suppression Bureau; a very detailed report of Situ Xiao's deeds and their consequences was sent to the capital and landed on Tang Wanzhuang's desk.

"Bashu no longer belongs to the Great Xia..." Tang Wanzhuang gently caressed the report. "But why do I feel a sense of relief rather than anger?"

Baoqin said, "You didn't raise a coward, yet somehow, he ended up being one."

With a loud splash, the window opened, and a young maid landed into the pond.

"Bureau chief, bureau chief, bad news!" A trusted member of the Demon Suppression Bureau came in to report. "Chaos has broken out in Jianghuai! Wan Tianxiong has rebelled!"

Tang Wanzhuang remained expressionless. "Oh."

"Bureau chief, bureau chief! Wang Daoning's forces have marched into Hebei, and the Cui and Wang clans are now at war in Puyang!"

Tang Wanzhuang gazed out the window at the peaceful scene outside. Just a few days ago, she had pleaded, in writing filled with heartbreak, for Xia Longyuan to apprehend the Wang Clan's forces in the capital. Yet until now, everything remained calm as nothing had been done.

Suddenly, she felt dizzy, and she began to cough violently.

She looked at her hand and saw that it was stained with blood.

Zhao Changhe had barely managed to stabilize her condition, but in just a short while, it had rapidly worsened.

* * *

Zhao Changhe rode from Shu toward the Jinsha River. He planned to take a boat down the river to Wu Gorge. After all, no matter who he sought out first, the Blood God Cult was on the way out of Shu, so he might as well go there first.

The scent of war and chaos in the air made Zhao Changhe realize the significance of being the saint of the Blood God Cult, something he had not taken seriously in the past.

In times like these, a solid faction was far more valuable than individual martial prowess, even the prowess of someone at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Sisi's faction could also be considered a supporting force, but they were too far away to have any immediate impact. The Blood God Cult, though not remarkable in numbers, was an elite force in a key location, and after being honed through several battles, they resembled a disciplined army. They were still stationed in Xiangyang and held considerable sway.

Perhaps the Blood God Cult could be considered part of the Four Idols Cult. At this point, they were likely involved in the rebellion—or perhaps they were lying low, prepared to act when needed as a strategic piece. Regardless, it was not appropriate for Zhao Changhe to openly pull them away, as that would simply risk souring relations with the Four Idols Cult.

However, if Zhao Changhe did things that did not conflict with the Four Idols Cult's stance, Vermillion Bird likely would not say anything. After all, he was the Fire Pig of Shi, and the current status of the Blood God Cult was largely his doing. Vermillion Bird had to at least acknowledge his authority to some extent when it came to utilizing the Blood God Cult.

The Four Idols Cult and the Wang Clan were currently allied. If Zhao Changhe used the Blood God Cult to fight against the Wang Clan, would that be a conflict of interest?

Unlikely.

No matter how solid an alliance seemed, once both parties started their own rebellions, it resulted in a conflict of interests, where they were both allies and rivals—history provided countless examples of this. Besides, Zhao Changhe was well aware that Vermillion Bird's relationship with the Wang Clan was purely one of mutual exploitation, and it was destined to end in betrayal. As long as he coordinated it well, Vermillion Bird might even be secretly pleased.

It might not be appropriate for Wan Tianxiong to oppose the Wang Clan so early, as there was an unspoken protocol even in rebellion. But the Blood God Cult was perfect for this role, since Wang Daozhong knew that Zhao Changhe was the saint of the Blood God Cult. Vermillion Bird could easily shift all responsibility for any of the Blood God Cult's actions onto "that rascal Zhao Changhe."

Of course, coordinating all this would still be a headache. If the Cui and Wang clans fought, the Four Idols Cult would no doubt be happy to see it, but if Zhao Changhe wanted to help the Cui Clan, how could he reconcile all these interests...

It was a tangled mess.

For now, he could not be bothered to think too much about it. He decided to meet Xue Canghai first. After all, he already had something for Xue Canghai that was more timely than ever. If Xue Canghai dared disobey the saint, he would not get what Zhao Changhe had brought.

After days of riding, he finally arrived at the riverbank. Zhao Changhe anxiously looked out over the river but could not find a single boat in sight.

"Blind woman, what level does someone need to reach to be able to fly? Even those on the Ranking of Heaven don't seem like they can truly fly. At most, they can hover or float in the air, or their movement arts allow them to glide a bit further. But none of that really counts as true flight."

"You already know the answer, so why bother asking?"

"What I'm asking is at what level can you really do it... Surely this isn't some kind of forbidden secret?"

"Can't you use your brain? Since you know that the third layer of the Profound Mysteries allows one to hover, the next stage would obviously allow for flight."

“The Profound Control Realm?”

“Profound Control inherently implies mastery over the elements, including the wind. You’re still a bit away from it, so keep working hard, little brother.”

Seeing a ferry finally appear in the distance, Zhao Changhe let out a breath of relief and did not respond to the blind woman.

Slowly but surely, the blind woman was adapting, like a frog in gradually warming water. She had gone from refusing to be a personal strategy guide, to keeping quiet or speaking in riddles, to now responding instinctively whenever Zhao Changhe called out for her... Things were progressing well.

The Profound Control Realm... Is it really that far away? Probably not.

The second layer of the Profound Mysteries already emphasized the control of vicious qi, which was, in essence, a form of control and mastery.

Each stage was a gradual progression in a sequence, each a different node along the same path.

All paths gradually led to mastery over heaven and earth.

Chapter 518: The Human King

No matter how anxious Zhao Changhe was to sprout wings and fly, the reality was that he had no choice but to board a boat with his horse, Snow-Treading Crow, and travel the old-fashioned way.

Rushing would not help. There was not much else he could do anyway. Zhao Changhe tried to calm his mind, sitting by the side of the boat, taking small sips of wine while casually flipping through the body cultivation manual that Situ Xiao had given him. He wanted to see if there was any way any of its principles could be integrated into his Blood Asura Body to address his physique’s lacking defensive capabilities.

Based on his current understanding of martial arts and the insights that Li Shentong had shared, he was almost certain that it was impossible for the two differing ideologies to mingle—the energy circulation and muscle structure that was developed from the cultivation of the two unique body cultivation techniques was simply too different. However, Zhao Changhe felt that his

comprehension was not complete yet, and even Li Shentong's interpretation was not necessarily the final answer. Perhaps, at some point in the future, integration would be possible. For now, he decided to hold on to it.

In any case, there were still some aspects of it that could be referenced and applied in the meantime, such as releasing vigorous qi to form a brief defensive barrier on the surface of the body.

The so-called vigorous qi was essentially a hallmark of combining external cultivation with internal cultivation after reaching the second layer of the Profound Mysteries. Zhao Changhe had already displayed early forms of this with his sword and saber qi. Once internal and external forces merged into a cohesive whole, the energy would become more tangible and be able to retain form much better. This was what led to sword force and saber force—the wielder was able to extend the length or width of a blade by using their qi.

If vigorous qi could be projected through a weapon, then it naturally followed that it could also be used to throw heavy punches, or even form a protective shield of energy over the body. Each sect and school had its own method for mobilizing vigorous qi, and the Divine Brilliance Sect's method was undeniably among the best of the best.

Though even the top methods could only provide an instantaneous defense and could not be sustained for long, it was still an additional life-saving technique and was thus undeniably valuable.

Situ Xiao had even shared the essence of the Drunken Steps, and Zhao Changhe was honestly surprised to find that this technique was truly not just for show. The way one rooted their lower body to the ground while allowing their upper body to move fluidly like a willow branch had significant reference value, and it was a style that vastly differed from the physical arts that he already had. With him being at a stage of developing his own techniques, this was an extremely useful addition to his repertoire.

Unfortunately, his mind was not in the right space to study either vigorous qi or Drunken Steps in detail at the moment.

Closing the book, Zhao Changhe stood up and looked toward the east. The morning sun was rising, and Wushan was faintly visible in the distance.

He could hear the vague conversations of other passengers. "Huh? Don't the boats to Wushan usually stop around here? Why are we sailing straight to Wu Gorge? Aren't they afraid of the mountain bandits?"

“Brother, how many years has it been since you’ve taken this route?”

“It’s been a year since I was last here.”

“A year? Well, that explains it. The bandits at Wushan were pacified months ago. This route’s safe now.”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Cult Leader Xue, boss of the Wushan bandits, you really should just stop harping on about your reputation having fallen after your loss to Hongling. It honestly seems that your reputation among the people was never that great to begin with.

From inside the cabin came a sigh. “It’s rare for the imperial court to actually do something right!”

“The imperial court? Ha, as if. This happened during the Xiangyang campaign led by First Seat Tang. Also, I’ve heard a lot of people say that it was thanks to Asura King’s effort in it.”

“First Seat Tang... well, that makes sense. Anytime the imperial court does something worthwhile, eight out of ten times, she’s involved. And if the Asura King intervened, it’s no surprise that it was handled quickly.”

“Uh...” Zhao Changhe poked his head into the cabin. “Excuse me, who is the Asura King?”

“Tch, of course, it’s Blood Asura Zhao Changhe! He’s number one on the Ranking of Man! Who else could be called the Human King?”

“Di Muzhi was also ranked first on the Ranking of Man, but no one called him a king. The Ranking of Man is just a ranking, isn’t it? Aren’t you exaggerating his prestige a bit too much?”

“Bah! How could Di Muzhi even compare to Blood Asura? He’s not even fit to hold his shoes!” A jianghu

traveler looked at Zhao Changhe with disdain. “Where did you even come from, kid? How can you not even know such basic jianghu lore?”

Zhao Changhe humbly asked, “Please enlighten me, brother.”

“Except for the most recent replacements, anyone who ascended to the top of the Ranking of Man before would usually be called a king. In the past, Vulture Beak was also referred to as Vulture King by the people of the Grasslands. We just didn’t call him that ourselves since, well, why would we flatter the northern barbarians? But the Blood Asura is different. We’ve watched him fight his way to the top. No matter how much we praise him, he deserves all of it.”

“But I really don’t want to be called Asura King...” Zhao Changhe muttered absentmindedly. “What kind of nonsense is this...”

The people in the cabin did not hear him and continued talking with great interest. “How many strikes do you think it took King Zhao to kill Di Muzhi? When he killed other people on the Ranking of Man, the Tome always said it was in one strike, but this time, the Tome didn’t say anything...”

King Zhao...? Zhao Changhe massaged his temples in frustration, feeling a headache from the overblown praise.

“Well, it was a battle for the top spot on the Ranking of Man, and that shameless Di Muzhi even had others attacking Zhao Changhe. Maybe the fight was fierce, with the sky darkening and the sun and moon losing light.”

“I think it must have been two or three strikes at most. That’s King Zhao’s style. He’s unstoppable!”

Zhao Changhe could not listen to the exaggerated flattery any longer. He turned around just in time to see the boatman approaching, clapping his hands. “We’re docking at Wu Gorge. Anyone disembarking, please get ready.”

Zhao Changhe let out a long sigh of relief. As soon as the boat docked, he practically fled, leading Snow-Treading Crow off the boat.

He had barely disembarked before a group of Blood God Cult members came rushing over. “Our Cult Leader was indeed correct—the saint has arrived within these two days!”

“Greetings, Saint!”

“Congratulations for reaching the top of the Ranking of Man!”

Zhao Changhe felt his face flush with embarrassment. He shouted angrily, “What’s with all this nonsense? Do you think I can’t find my way to the base without you meeting me at the dock?”

“Ahem, well, the brothers insisted on coming. You’re the pride of our cult, after all!”

The Blood God Cult members surrounded Zhao Changhe as they headed up the mountain, their cheers and flattering remarks fading into the distance.

On the boat, the passengers looked at each other. “Who was it that called him a kid earlier?”

That man held back for a long while, then suddenly burst into laughter. “They used to say he’s the most down-to-earth of the Hidden Dragons. Seems like that’s entirely true. Even after reaching the top of the Ranking of Man, he’s still the same.”

Everyone else laughed, too—it really was true. He had not put on any airs at all, and being called a king even seemed to only make him blush in embarrassment.

* * *

“I really can’t take this anymore, Old Xue. This is ridiculous. It’s just the Ranking of Man. What’s with all the fuss? Anyone who doesn’t know better might think that I’m first on the Ranking of Heaven,” Zhao Changhe grumbled as he followed Xue Canghai into the cult’s sacred artifact chamber. “I’m going to head to Qinghe soon. Old Cui is definitely going to laugh at me to death. I feel like I can’t show my face anymore.”

“It’s actually a long-standing tradition. It’s just that the people who filled the top spot recently haven’t been very impressive, so no one made a big deal out of it. But for those who fought their way up, it’s different—they truly deserve to be given the title of king. Besides, it’s just a bit of fun among the people. It’s not like you’re the one declaring yourself a king, so who’s going to laugh at you?” Xue Canghai explained. “And think about it. When you first heard Blood Asura, didn’t you think it sounded silly? But after hearing it enough times, hasn’t it become quite catchy? Just endure it, and it’ll pass.”

“...”

“And as for Cui Wenjing, he might not even have time to laugh at you.” Xue Canghai sighed. “I just got word that the Wang Clan’s forces have already surrounded Puyang.”

Zhao Changhe opened his mouth but then closed it again.

It was something he had expected, so there was no point in saying anything now. He could only sigh at how Cui Yuanyong’s newlywed wife was truly a sacrificial pawn of her family. It was easy to imagine how difficult her life would be in the Cui Clan now.

He wondered if Wang Daoning was leading the troops himself. If so, then perhaps Old Cui was already fighting him.

Just a few days ago, it seemed like there had not been a battle between the figures on the Ranking of Heaven in years. Yet within days, there had been two—the fifth against the sixth, and the ninth against the tenth.

Ever since Zhao Changhe’s arrival, people spoke about the troubled times to come. Now, it seemed that the troubled times had fully arrived.

Zhao Changhe grew increasingly worried. Although Cui Wenjing’s ranking was higher than Wang Daoning’s, Wang Daoning had some underhanded backing, and the Cui Clan’s Qinghe Sword had yet to fully reawaken. The outcome of this battle was thus far from certain.

Xue Canghai shook his head in regret. “That damn bastard... When I chased Wang Daozhong that time, I couldn’t take him down. If I killed that bastard, the Wang Clan would’ve lost one of its key pillars.”

Zhao Changhe snapped out of his thoughts and asked, “How did you even run into Wang Daozhong?”

“Well, it was about half a month ago. For some reason, the sacred artifact suddenly went berserk. It was shaking like crazy, and its energy was extremely unstable. Wang Daozhong showed up around that time, probably knowing about our relationship with you, and deliberately came to cause

trouble. But something happened to him, and he suddenly seemed to suffer from a serious injury... Otherwise, our stronghold would have probably been destroyed.”

“That’s really low, Old Wang...” Zhao Changhe muttered to himself. He was not exactly sure what had happened to Wang Daozhong, but he had a general idea of why the sacred artifact had acted up.

It was most likely the day the array at the Ao Pool was broken, and the juvenile Blood Ao emerged.

The array plate was forged from the bones of the Blood Ao, and a divine artifact of such a level was likely to have its own spirit. It must have sensed a connection through its bloodline or felt an opportunity to repair itself, which caused the disturbance.

With a sense of certainty, Zhao Changhe strode confidently into the sacred artifact chamber and took out a vial of blood.

The array plate began to tremble again, even more violently than on that day.

Zhao Changhe carefully poured the blood onto the cracked surface of the array plate. A blinding crimson light erupted, and a surge of vicious qi shot skyward, lingering for a long time.

The cracks in the array plate began to visibly mend, leaving Xue Canghai utterly stunned.

Is this even possible? It’s clearly made from some dead creature, yet the cracks are mending themselves? How does that even work?

As he watched the cracks on the array plate slowly heal, Zhao Changhe suddenly spoke up, “Old Xue.”

Xue Canghai jolted, instinctively dropping to one knee. “Saint, please give your command.”

“Gather a few thousand elite troops and head north with me. We’ll join the battle against the Wang Clan. Leave only a small force in Xiangyang to defend the city. The real storm won’t be coming here anytime soon.”

“Understood.” Xue Canghai did not dare voice a single objection. After showing his allegiance, he carefully added a reminder, “This is a battle between figures on the Ranking of Heaven. You must be cautious.”

His implication was to not get too carried away with the thought of getting married, and to calmly assess his strength and consider everything carefully before acting.

Before he could even finish, there was a crisp “crack” as the array plate was fully restored.

Zhao Changhe reached out and touched it, and suddenly the array plate, which spanned several zhang, disappeared into his ring. “Even if some components are missing and its full power can’t be realized, the main structure has been restored. It can at least deliver an attack at the level of those on the Ranking of Heaven. If Wang Daoning thinks we’re not worth his attention, then let’s give him a taste of ancient might.”

Xue Canghai was stunned.

Where did the fucking array plate go? That thing was several zhang in size! How did it just vanish like that? How can he take it just like that...

Well... Nah, even if the array plate has been repaired, none of us know how to use it. There’s nothing in the records about this, so why does it sound like he’s known how to use it all along?

Is he really just a saint... Is he not the Blood God himself?

Chapter 519: No Room for Luck

Boom!

A massive stone crashed against the city wall, shattering bricks and sending debris flying. Nearby soldiers scattered in all directions.

The stone rolled to the ground, and it was just about to crush a soldier when purple qi suddenly surged and a hand slammed onto the stone, shattering it into fragments.

The soldier, still shaken, quickly saluted and expressed his gratitude. “Thank you, Young General.”

Cui Yuanyong waved him off and shouted, “Fire!”

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

Numerous massive stones were catapulted from within the city, crashing down with resounding booms and smashing the approaching battering rams to pieces.

Some of the stones missed their targets, crushing soldiers into bloody pulp.

Still, countless soldiers continued to swarm, pushing siege engines with all their might toward the city walls.

Standing atop the city walls, Cui Yuanyong looked out over the battlefield. Arrows filled the sky like a locust swarm, and boulders fell chaotically. Below, an endless tide of soldiers surged forward. He felt oddly detached, as if he was not on the battlefield himself but watching it all from far above.

This was different from his previous experience at Yanmen Pass. There was no room for impulsive fervor here. Now, as the commander responsible for all the defensive decisions, he needed absolute composure. Any mistake could lead to catastrophic consequences.

Long before, during the decisive battle in Kuaiji, when Wang Zhaoling intended to head south, Cui Yuanyong had stationed his troops at Puyang to pressure the Wang Clan. He had not left since then. His father had held no illusions, knowing that if the Wang Clan rebelled, this place would be the first stronghold on the western front. As a result, they had continuously reinforced the defenses here, making Puyang’s defenses among the strongest in this civil war.

Cui Yuanyong had once thought that with Puyang being so difficult to capture, the Wang Clan would likely choose another route. But it turned out his father’s judgment was spot on. Heading south would have been pointless for the Wang Clan. With the southern Cao Gang stirring up trouble, the Tang Clan was temporarily unable to intervene in the north, giving the Wang Clan the perfect opportunity to head straight north toward the capital, hoping to seize the entire nation in one go.

With the capital to the north, the Wang Clan had to get past the Cui Clan first. The Cui-Wang alliance through marriage was initially partly intended for this reason. Once they were united, their forces could potentially threaten the capital directly.

But now, Cui Wenjing was not only refusing to merge forces but was not even attempting to feign resistance and let the Wang Clan secretly pass—a typical aristocratic maneuver. Instead, they were engaging in full resistance, clear and open. There were some murmurs within the Cui Clan that Cui Wenjing was cutting off any retreat, making it an unwise choice.

But nothing anyone said mattered—Cui Wenjing’s resolve was so strong that even his own wife was astonished, feeling as if he were a different person.

Cui Yuanyong remembered asking his father, “You once said that in a world of gods and demons, there would also be families of gods and demons. The rule of gods and demons is, at its core, no different from the northern barbarians invading. So why are we so determined this time, acting like loyal servants of the Great Xia...?”

His father’s answer was, “If barbarians invade, at worst, you shave your head, change your clothes, and adopt new customs. At the end of the day, the Cui Clan will still be the Cui Clan. Even with other gods or demons, as long as they require the human world to survive, you and I still have value. But the Sea Tribe is different... They live in the sea and have no need for the land. I don’t know their exact purpose, but I do know that their living conditions are fundamentally different from ours. We can’t afford to have any illusions.”

After saying this, his father emphasized again: “No illusions, none at all.”

Cui Yuanyong took a deep breath, raised his sword high, and shouted, “Prepare the rolling stones!”

Boom!

A battering ram advanced through the rain of stones and arrows, reaching the city gates.

Massive stones rolled down from above, smashing the rams and the soldiers pushing them into pulp.

Cui Yuanyong looked up at the sky, his thoughts still finding it difficult to focus on the battlefield. He believed that Wang Zhaoling, who stood below, was feeling the same... The outcome of this

battle was not as much about the field tactics as it was about the outcome of the duel between those on the Ranking of Heaven.

In the first battle, Wang Daoning would undoubtedly lead his troops himself, aiming to make a strong impression. If he was pushed back right at the start, it would be a massive humiliation. Thus, he was determined to win. No matter how well the defenses were prepared, they could not stop someone of the Ranking of Heaven from breaching them.

But Wang Daoning had yet to appear, and the only possible reason was that his father had also arrived.

* * *

On the banks of the Puyang River, Wang Daoning and Cui Wenjing stood side by side, facing the water, as if two old friends reunited after years apart, enjoying the view.

Neither spoke for half an hour.

The distant sounds of battle faintly reached them, adding a strange sense of tranquility to the sound of the flowing river in front of them.

“Time flows on like this river, ceaselessly, day and night,” Wang Daoning finally said, still looking at the water. “How many years have we known each other?”

Cui Wenjing replied, “I left home to travel and study at sixteen. We met here at Puyang and fought... It’s been thirty years now.”

The so-called “Old Cui” was, in fact, only forty-six.

“And here we are again at Puyang—though not the same part of the river.” Wang Daoning gave a small laugh. “Sometimes it all feels like fate.”

Cui Wenjing said plainly, “You didn’t have to come. This was your own choice, not fate.”

Wang Daoning shook his head. “When I visited Qinghe a few years ago, your attitude wasn’t like this. Even though you always leaned toward Xia Longyuan, you still criticized him for many of the things he did. You even called him inhumane. You suspected that he’d done something underhanded to the Qinghe Sword, and you cursed him; you said that if he continued down his reckless path, the Great Xia would eventually collapse... You said all of that. I remember those conversations vividly, and today, your choice is hard for me to understand.”

Cui Wenjing said, “The moment you targeted the Yang Clan’s Lianshan Sword, we were destined to part ways. That was the line—you shook the very foundation of the unspoken agreement between aristocratic families. Xia Longyuan might be ruthless, but he still left some lines untouched.”

“Just because of that?”

“Just because of that.”

“What if I gave you my word?”

“Sorry, but I can’t trust you,” Cui Wenjing said calmly. “I can’t even be sure how much of the Wang Daoning standing here before me is the real Wang Daoning and how much is under someone else’s control.”

Wang Daoning smiled. “No one can control me.”

Cui Wenjing replied, “Shi Wuding thought the same.”

Anyone ranked on the Ranking of Heaven who had met Shi Wuding knew there was something strange about his soul. Cui Wenjing knew it, and so did Wang Daoning.

Wang Daoning said, “Do I look like I’m in the same state as Shi Wuding?”

Cui Wenjing glanced at him. “I don’t know, but I don’t take chances. If there is something out there that could make you not yourself, then I don’t think I’d be able to tell. The third layer of the Profound Mysteries is far from the end—you and I both know that.”

“If you’ve completely lost trust in me, then there’s nothing left to discuss.”

“There was never any need to discuss anything.”

“But you can’t beat me, Wenjing. You and I have always been evenly matched, and now, my Zhenhai Sword has been fully restored, while your Qinghe Sword remains half-dead.”

Cui Wenjing smiled. “Perhaps. But you aren’t confident you can avoid injury, which is why you’re attempting this last bit of persuasion.”

Wang Daoning slowly said, “But you will die.”

Cui Wenjing’s smile grew even brighter. “If I die, but you are forced to return wounded, then it will be up to Yuanyong and Zhaoling to decide the outcome... Once you and I are done, it’s their time to step onto the stage.”

There was a hint of playful defiance in Cui Wenjing’s smile that left Wang Daoning feeling a bit helpless.

If the older generation withdrew from the world stage and the younger generation took over, one name would immediately flash through everyone’s mind—someone whose presence made his peers feel breathless. As the Tome of Troubled Times recently said, “After I bloom, all flowers wither.”

That person was Old Cui’s son-in-law, though he had yet to actually marry his daughter.

It had to be said that Cui Wenjing’s resolve stirred something even in Wang Daoning’s heart.

Thirty years of friendship, and for the first time, he saw this old fox so determined—he allowed no room for luck, and the future of his family mattered to him more than his own life.

To have such a person as an obstacle was enough to give anyone a headache.

Wang Daoning finally gave up on any further attempts at persuasion and slowly drew his Zhenhai Sword. “Brother Cui, let us finish the battle we started thirty years ago.”

The Qinghe Sword left its scabbard on its own, swirling around Cui Wenjing. “Please.”

Boom!

Thunder suddenly boomed in the sky as torrential rain poured down.

On the battlefield, Wang Zhaoling had no choice but to halt the siege. It was impossible to scale the walls in this weather.

Yet, today's forecast predicted no rain.

This sudden downpour had no other explanation—it could only be the result of the duel between those on the Ranking of Heaven affecting the heavens themselves.

The Wang Clan's Zhenhai Sword and the Cui Clan's Qinghe Purple Qi were both associated with water. When these two forces clashed, the result was a torrential downpour.

A hundred li to the south, the skies were clear, and three thousand Blood God Cult members rode across the plains. Looking at the dark storm clouds in the distance, each of them was filled with awe. "Why is it raining over there?"

Zhao Changhe led the way, breaking away from the group in a mad dash. "Prepare to strike at the Wang Clan's flank! Old Xue will take full command—don't worry about me!"

Boom!

A massive bolt of lightning split the sky, illuminating the plains in a blinding white. The clouds were infused with purple qi, making it hard to tell whether the light was from the lightning or a sword.

Chapter 520: Sword Control and Water Control

In midair, two sword energies clashed thousands of times in the blink of an eye. Lightning and sword flashed so intensely that the figures engaged in battle were barely visible.

On one side, the raging sea roared, waves crashing against the shore in an endless barrage.

On the other side, purple qi filled the air, layer upon layer, as the wild waves surged across the mountains and rivers, soon diluting to nothing but trickling streams.

Every time Wang Daoning fought against Cui Wenjing, he felt this frustrating powerlessness, a sense that his strength had nowhere to go. The two seemed to counter each other perfectly, which was why Wang Daoning was always ranked below Cui Wenjing on the Ranking of Troubled Times.

It was not about softness overcoming hardness... Cui Wenjing was anything but soft.

He was vast, with his purple qi filling the mountains and rivers, displaying a magnificent aura.

Wang Daoning had always struggled to understand how someone so devoted to his family could embody the grandeur of rivers and mountains. And yet, the contradictions seemed to harmonize perfectly in Cui Wenjing. He was simply a paradox.

For this very reason, even though he seemed to embody the true destiny of the Qinghe Sword, he still had not gained its full acknowledgment. To the sword spirit, he was close, but not quite there.

But it no longer mattered whether the sword spirit recognized him or not. The Qinghe Sword had lost half its power when Xia Longyuan seized it, and its spirit's slumber was largely due to this loss of power. Meanwhile, Wang Daoning's Zhenhai Sword had been fully restored, replenished with energy from the Sea Tribe. Cui Wenjing might think that the Zhenhai Sword was no longer truly itself, but Wang Daoning knew otherwise.

The vast purple qi around Cui Wenjing began to ripple, as if struggling to hold its ground.

“With the grandeur of mountains and rivers, you try to contain the fury of the raging sea... Wenjing, have you ever considered that the sea is actually more expansive than the land? It may seem like you can suppress it, but when the imbalance in power becomes too great, you might find yourself completely overwhelmed and submerged.”

The Zhenhai Sword seemed to advance toward Cui Wenjing at an incredibly slow pace, so slowly that one could see the engravings and carvings on the blade, each character clear and distinct.

But in Cui Wenjing's eyes, there was no sword in front of him, nor was there Wang Daoning.

It was as if he stood alone on a crumbling reef, facing a towering wave a hundred zhang high. It seemed to approach slowly from a distance, yet it was inevitable—an overwhelming, suffocating force.

“Your cultivation has improved, too. It’s not just because of the Zhenhai Sword... No wonder you’re so confident.” Cui Wenjing’s eyes were calm, devoid of any sorrow or joy. “But I haven’t stood still either.”

A tiny glimmer of purple light appeared within the roaring waves. It seemed faint and insignificant at first, but that small flicker pierced through the overwhelming tide, refusing to be dissolved by the monstrous wave.

Wang Daoning’s pupils contracted. “You’ve reached this level too...”

“Indeed.

”

The towering wave suddenly condensed into an extremely fine line, like the distant horizon where the sea met the sky.

Clang!

The tips of their swords met, and both fighters were shaken, blood trickling from the corners of their mouths as they were sent flying backward.

Though they were at the bottom of the Ranking of Heaven, both of them had glimpsed the threshold of the Profound Control Realm.

Even with the restored Zhenhai Sword, and Wang Daoning borrowing more of its power than Cui Wenjing could from the Qinghe Sword, it was still a draw!

The rankings in the Ranking of Heaven were accurate in the end.

As Wang Daoning flew backward, he suddenly extended his left hand, grasping at the air.

Cui Wenjing, initially only lightly injured and quietly regulating his disrupted internal state, suddenly felt his entire body tighten. Blood seemed to flow out from the previous wound, gushing forth again. He spat out a mouthful of fresh blood, his body plummeting like a kite with its string cut, blood spilling through the air.

Even his sword slipped from his hand, wobbling as it fell.

Unable to even pick up his sword, Cui Wenjing struggled to suppress his rampaging blood, speaking softly, "Drawing out the water element within the body... this isn't a technique of the Wang Clan, it isn't even a technique of this world. It must be from the Sea Tribe..."

"My apologies, Wenjing." Wang Daoning stopped his backward motion and launched forward in midair, his sword poised to strike.

But Cui Wenjing revealed a faint smile.

How could he not have anticipated that the Wang Clan would possess secret arts belonging to the Sea Tribe? He had pored over countless ancient texts in recent days, making countless secret preparations. Although he could not entirely counter it, he was not so unprepared as to be beaten so miserably, even dropping his sword.

Just as Wang Daoning believed victory was in his grasp, the seemingly wavering Qinghe Sword suddenly flew silently back up, aiming straight at Wang Daoning's back!

This was not the work of the Qinghe Sword's spirit... this was Cui Wenjing controlling the sword with his will!

Pah!

Wang Daoning's sword thrust forward, and Cui Wenjing brought his palms together, allowing the sword qi to pass through his body as he firmly clamped onto the Zhenhai Sword.

Warning bells tolled in Wang Daoning's mind. He knew something was attacking from behind, but he was reluctant to abandon the ancestral divine sword.

That moment of hesitation cost him.

Awkwardly holding onto the sword, he twisted his upper body just enough so that the Qinghe Sword grazed his right flank, piercing through before returning to Cui Wenjing's hand.

Cui Wenjing caught his sword, falling to the ground like a kite with its string cut, laughing aloud.

Just as he expected—people like them, from aristocratic families, could let go of many things, but abandoning an ancestral sword felt worse than death. Wang Daoning could not bear to let go of his sword, just as he himself could not imagine dying without his own sword by his side.

Such a result was fitting.

He had no strength left to resist, and Wang Daoning still had enough energy to finish him off. But Wang Daoning was also gravely injured—unlikely to be able to continue attacking Puyang. He would have to retreat to heal and recover... What happened next would be up to their children...

Wang Daoning pressed his hand against the wound on his side, shaking his head. He could not help but admire his old friend's cunning and resolve. Holding his sword, he drifted downward. "Wenjing, I'm sorry."

Just then, his heart suddenly skipped a beat, and he looked southward in shock.

A fierce wave of vicious energy surged across the sky, staining it blood-red. Even from a distance, it filled him with an instinctive sense of dread.

It was as if the power of a ferocious beast from primordial times had descended. In the blink of an eye, the dark red wave of blood was upon him.

Wang Daoning swung his sword horizontally in a desperate strike, but he was badly wounded, and the blood wave broke through. He failed to dispel the vicious qi, and it crashed into him with immense force. Though he quickly activated his vigorous qi to protect himself, his entire body was still torn apart, leaving him in a pitiful state.

Now, both he and Cui Wenjing were equally injured...

This is definitely an attack at the threshold of the Profound Control Realm. Which figure on the Ranking of Heaven came to reap the rewards?

Wang Daoning strained to look and saw a large man wielding a saber, charging forward with a roar, “Damn you! You hurt my father-in-law and you think you can leave?!”

...Zhao Changhe? How on earth did he deliver that strike?

Wang Daoning could almost see Cui Wenjing sprawled on the ground, grinning ear to ear.

Damn it.

What infuriated Wang Daoning the most was that now he really had to retreat; otherwise, the Tome of Troubled Times might soon announce his death.

No... wait.

Just as he was about to turn away, Wang Daoning stopped.

Zhao Changhe must be killed now. Zhaoling won't be able to handle him in the future.

As this thought crossed his mind, Zhao Changhe was already charging forward, leaping into the air, his broad saber slashing down furiously. “Die!”

A transparent, watery shadow suddenly emerged from behind Wang Daoning, a silent palm strike aimed at Zhao Changhe's chest.

Cui Wenjing cried out in alarm, “Watch out!”

Suddenly, from the sky descended a dragon-shaped fist shadow, viciously slamming into the watery figure.

Wang Daoning's face went pale with shock. “Xia Longyuan!”

Zhao Changhe had no time to concern himself with Wang Daoning any further. With all his strength, he lunged forward, grabbing Cui Wenjing and carrying him away from the range of the fist's impact.

Boom!

An earth-shattering explosion echoed across the land.

Zhao Changhe did not fully escape the residual shockwave; he was blown away, forced to roll several times before coming to a stop. He coughed and turned his head and saw that the riverbank plains had been obliterated by the blast, leaving behind a deep crater dozens of zhang wide.

Wang Daoning had vanished, and the watery shadow was also nowhere to be seen.

Looking down at his father-in-law in his arms, Zhao Changhe saw his face had turned deathly pale, and he had lost consciousness.

After catching his breath, Zhao Changhe suddenly jumped to his feet and pointed at the sky. "Old Xia, you bastard! You clearly watched the whole fight here, yet you let Old Cui face death alone? But the moment you see the Sea Tribe, you rushed to intervene without even caring if you'd cause collateral damage? Do you think you're some hot shit?! Others are protecting your empire—your empire!"

Only silence met his anger.

The air was still, and for a long time, there was no response.

At that moment, three thousand members of the Blood God Cult arrived at the edge of the battlefield.

After weighing his options, Wang Zhaoling had no desire to continue fighting and withdrew with his forces.

Cui Yuanyong opened the city gates and led a group of light cavalry in pursuit. Both sides skirmished briefly before pulling back.

The Wang Clan's first battle of rebellion ended in defeat.