

T. Times 571

Chapter 571: The Unfinished Secret of the Ancient Spirit Tribe

To glimpse the mystical through martial arts, one must ultimately find a thread to pull, a revelation.

The Four Idols Cult, despite boasting a rich heritage, still held many limitations and deficiencies. Even Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise had to seek their own opportunities.

The crystal cores used by the Sea Emperor for his water constructs served as Lady Three's thread for peering into the divine. It seemed that her recent days spent studying the crystal cores had truly yielded new insights. Her mastery of water was no longer limited to merely borrowing its power; she was now beginning to understand the finer nuances of its properties.

That was true mastery, true control.

Venerable Black Tortoise had taken a crucial step toward the Profound Control Realm.

And this step was undoubtedly connected to their recent dual cultivation...

Dual cultivation was always about mutual growth—not one-sided gain or loss. Lady Three's own cultivation also improved, as she absorbed certain aspects of Zhao Changhe's Spring Water Sword Intent. The essence of the Spring Water Sword Intent was not just water; its essence was rooted in the visual deceptions of reflection and refraction. The ability to create mirages using water was not solely a property of water; obviously, it involved light. Yet light alone could not achieve such an effect; it still required the presence of a medium that could reflect and refract it.

All things do not exist independently; their unique qualities are often shaped by their interactions with others. Realizing this brought her a qualitative leap in understanding.

Of course, it wasn't like these principles were beyond comprehension before. Xia Chichi being able to wield two opposing elements[1] was something Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise admired and valued immensely.

Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, was even more enthusiastic: "I want to learn that. Teach me, please!"

Lady Three put away the water ball with a haughty expression, turning away. “No.”

“Oh, come on, my dear Lady Three, I am your most trusted general, your humble Fire Pig of Shi,” he pleaded.

“The Fire Pig of Shi should be learning about fire, not this,” she retorted. “What do you even plan to do with it? Are you planning to record me without clothes or something?”

“...I can look at you directly. Why would I need to sneak a picture?”

“Oh, so you want to secretly record others, is that it? Wait, what are you doing... Ah, easy there, you damn pig... Ah... Hmm... Hey? Don’t, you!”

“...”

“You... You shameless pig! Wahh! Fine, fine, I’ll teach you, alright?”

In the end, Zhao Changhe managed to learn the technique, though there was still quite a difference in skill between them.

He looked at the blurry mess in his hands, unable to clearly make out what he had even captured. The image he captured was incomparable to Lady Three’s 4K-quality recording, and it did not even last long before it faded. Still, he kept grinning foolishly, taking endless selfies as if he could not get enough.

Lady Three lay sprawled to the side, exhausted. Watching his ridiculous expression, she could not decide whether to be angry or amused. She waved him away weakly. “Go practice, you pig.”

Zhao Changhe dashed out, leaping off the deck and plunging headfirst into the ocean. Tang En and the others, watching from outside the cabin, stared at him with wide eyes as he dove into the deep sea and began throwing punches beneath the waves.

To them, it was as if they were witnessing a divine being.

Strange noises had been emanating from his cabin for hours. Any ordinary man would be utterly exhausted by now, lying there like a dead dog. Yet here he was, diving into the sea to train with such intensity!

Can that voluptuous beauty inside even keep up with him? Well, she certainly seems built for it, so maybe she can.

But what about our young lady? With that frail and delicate body of hers... could she handle him at all? Wouldn't she end up being completely overwhelmed?

"C-captain, look over there... Is that a whale or an island? It's hard to tell in the dark."

Under the full moon glowing in the sky, Tang En squinted at the distant shadow and raised his hand. "That must be a whale. No need to panic. Ready the array, prepare the ballistae—"

Whoosh!

A figure shot up from the water, dashing across the waves toward the distant whale.

Tang En still had his hand raised in mid-air, his mouth open in stunned disbelief. They all watched as Zhao Changhe leaped onto the back of the whale and landed a solid punch.

The entire crew: "..."

Man and whale fought beneath the moon, the distance making it hard to see the details. But it was clear that the massive creature's earlier thrashing and turbulence gradually began to settle, the motions growing smaller until all was silent.

Zhao Changhe guided the whale back to the ship, waving from afar. "Hello, everyone!"

The whale obediently turned around, moving alongside the ship, reduced to his mount—the same fate the shark had faced earlier.

Tang En turned to a crew member and commented, "I feel like he doesn't even need our ship anymore."

One of the sailors murmured, “He still does... for a bed. When he’s tired, he can come back and sleep with a woman.”

Smack!

Tang En slapped the back of the sailor’s head. “Don’t degrade us like that! Who allowed you to compare our Tang Clan’s flagship to a brothel?!”

The men were not sure whether they should be angry or laugh. Regardless, as they looked up at Zhao Changhe riding the whale ahead, cutting through the waves under the moonlight, they could not help but feel a touch of envy.

A man in his prime, defeating whales with his fists in the Eastern Sea by day, holding beauty in his arms by night....

* * *

This voyage for Zhao Changhe, aside from deepening his relationship with Lady Three, was not much different from his time on Lai Qi’s ship. His primary focus remained on training. By day, he plunged into the ocean, honing his skills beneath the waves; by night, he dual cultivated with Lady Three. The difference now was that their imagined relationship had become reality.

The results this time were significantly better than the days he had spent on Lai Qi’s ship. The progress from dual cultivation alone was incomparable—even without the vital yin, the subsequent effects were extraordinary, almost visibly pushing his cultivation to advance.

His understanding of the water element also grew more profound and refined by the day, almost giving the impression that it was becoming his primary focus, even overshadowing his understanding of vicious qi.

This progress was largely due to the impressive adaptability of the Six Harmonies Art. Using it as a foundation allowed Zhao Changhe to navigate any path without difficulty. The most significant impact so far has been on his Rejuvenation Art. The imagery of water nourishing all living things and restoring vitality was becoming increasingly clear, and the sense of rejuvenation now extended from the physical body to the soul sea.

If this continues, perhaps I can revisit the idea of healing Wanzhuang.

The images that he captured using the Water Mirror Technique grew sharper with each passing day. His control became more refined, and eventually, he could even make out the scar on his own face.

This also revealed the considerable gap between the second and third layers of the Profound Mysteries. Lady Three's cultivation seemed unfathomable to him, in every possible way.

Lady Three, meanwhile, reaped her own benefits. She spent her days lounging lazily, resting comfortably without expending any effort, yet her cultivation continued to improve. As long as she replenished her energy, everything else seemed to take care of itself... Zhao Changhe suspected she was now getting closer and closer to truly breaking into the Profound Control Realm. He wondered what that threshold might be.

When he tried to ask the blind woman, she remained utterly silent, ignoring him entirely.

"The Profound Control Realm? I don't need to ask others. I know how to achieve it myself," Lady Three would say as she occasionally joined Zhao Changhe atop the whale to relax, taking in the fresh sea breeze that tousled her hair while leaning comfortably in his embrace. Lying in his embrace felt far better than resting on a wooden chair indoors, even more so when he was also strategizing for her cultivation.

Zhao Changhe asked, "But isn't the Four Idols Cult lacking in cultivation techniques for breaking through to the Profound Control Realm?"

"But we did search the remnants of the Maitreya Secret Realm and the corpse demon's soul, didn't we?" Lady Three replied. "Not only did we acquire relevant knowledge, but we also learned a lot of ancient secrets, some involving ancient Buddhist practices, which are quite interesting."

Zhao Changhe was not particularly interested in ancient Buddhist practices. "Did you record the Spirit-Controlling Technique and the Beast Spirit Fusion Art that the corpse demon knew? You must have copied them down, right? Pass me a copy later."

Lady Three became cautious. "What do you want those for?"

Zhao Changhe feigned ignorance, looking up at the sky.

“There’s still quite a lot of mystery surrounding the Ancient Spirit Tribe,” Lady Three said, suddenly serious. She moved away from his embrace, turned around, and locked eyes with him. “I can give you what you’re asking for, but don’t get yourself killed because of some foolish lust. My advice is to keep your distance from the Ancient Spirit Tribe and not get involved with them lightly.”

Zhao Changhe blinked. “Is it that serious?”

Oh, right. I remember thinking about it before: the ancient Black Tortoise had a deep understanding of the origin of the Ancient Spirit Tribe’s territory, and might have known that the entire land of the Ancient Spirit Tribe was shaped by a great shaman. Now that the current Black Tortoise is right here, maybe I could connect some dots.

Sure enough, Lady Three said, “I’ve read some vague records from the ancient Black Tortoise’s inheritance, and combined with the information from the remnants of Xue Wu’s soul, there’s reason to suspect that the founding shaman of the Ancient Spirit Tribe was personally slain by the Heavenly Dao back when it still existed. If you believe the Heavenly Dao had a spirit, then the land of the Ancient Spirit Tribe is a land rejected by the Heavenly Dao, and the members of the Ancient Spirit Tribe themselves are a cursed group of exiles. It could even be said that if we trace it back, the death of the Heavenly Dao, the collapse of the previous epoch, everything may have stemmed from there. The magnitude of this matter... is far beyond what either of us can currently handle.”

Zhao Changhe was stunned for a long while before finally saying, “The Ancient Spirit Tribe has some information that mentions Vermilion Bird and White Tiger converging in the southwestern wilderness. I wonder if they are describing celestial phenomena or if it somehow relates to your Four Idols Cult.”

“It’s possible there is a connection. The Night Emperor was also pursuing this in the past, hoping to replace the heavens.”

Zhao Changhe could understand this. The title “Night Emperor” was actually almost a modest designation, implying rule only over the night and not the day. But in essence, the Night Emperor was the ruler of the stars as well, the ruler of the firmament.

At the level that the Night Emperor had reached, it would not be surprising if the Heavenly Dao were a vague, abstract concept. However, in the case that the Heavenly Dao was actually a tangible entity, then the Night Emperor would have almost certainly been very close to it. With the death of the Heavenly Dao, the Night Emperor taking its place would seem inevitable.

However, the Heavenly Dao was an intangible concept and, in material terms, represented the world itself. With its death, the world would perish as well, thus the shifting of eras. Without a world to sustain them, all beings that resided within the world, including the Night Emperor, would lose their foundation. This was why when the Heavenly Dao perished, the collapse of the era took place, the gods and Buddhas were scattered, and the Night Emperor failed to replace the heavens, and everyone was reduced to mere shadows of their former grand selves.

This seems to be related to my arrival in this world. It's certainly not something that I can delve into right now. One wrong step and it could spell my utter annihilation.

So far, I can't even defeat the water constructs created by the Sea Emperor... But at least this time, I am not the main force. The Sea Emperor's level far surpasses that of Xue Wu and Venerable Duoluo. If I can somehow unravel the mystery of the Sea Emperor, perhaps many secrets of the gods and demons will be revealed completely and plainly.

As these thoughts swirled in his mind, Zhao Changhe sensed a distortion of sorts ahead, a strange presence in the distance. Gazing ahead, he saw rippling waves, refracted light, and a long rainbow-like bridge stretching across the horizon. An island loomed faintly at the edge of the sea and sky, its vastness uncertain.

It was impossible to estimate just how far they still had to travel to reach it.

Nevertheless, it seemed that they were getting closer to their destination in these endless seas.

Chapter 572: A Dream-Like Island

The island lay far in the Eastern Sea. The Tang Clan's fleet approached from the southwest, while Xia Chichi and Hai Pinglan came from the northwest. The two parties came from two separate directions, unlikely to meet.

Throughout the journey, Xia Chichi sat cross-legged with her eyes closed, diligently cultivating, something that even earned Hai Pinglan's respect. He could tell that, at first, this young lady had not wanted to travel alongside him. Anyone could sense that she was being used as bait. It seemed she had considered jumping ship and fleeing but ultimately decided against it.

If Hai Pinglan truly intended to use her as bait, any attempt to escape would have been futile, only changing her status from an apparent ally to an obvious prisoner, so why bother?

Instead, she chose to cultivate openly on the ship, unashamedly asking for resources and pills when needed, which Hai Pinglan generously provided.

She could not be more than twenty years old this year, yet she carried herself with such calm poise. Hai Pinglan could not help but think of his own daughter—when she left at sixteen or seventeen, she was fiery and impulsive, brimming with a rebellious spirit. Hah, couldn't she have learned a thing or two from Xia Chichi about being calm and collected?

They arrived a day earlier than Zhao Changhe.

When they arrived, it was dusk. The island was not far off, shrouded in a mysterious haze, distorted air twisting around it. Xia Chichi woke up from her meditation and stepped out onto the bow of the ship.

Hai Pinglan had been standing there for some time, staring at the island.

Xia Chichi looked ahead. The setting sun dipped in the west, and the island lay bathed in a shimmering, distorted light. The light seemed blurred, with a rainbow-like bridge arching across the sky as if inviting them onward yet remaining elusive. Scattered around the island, some fishing boats lingered on the outskirts of this hazy boundary; fishermen knelt at the bows of their vessels, kowtowing in prayer, seemingly seeking divine protection.

But no ship dared to enter the area of distorted light around the island.

Xia Chichi asked, "Why aren't they making landfall? Are they afraid? Or are they reverent?"

Hai Pinglan replied, "It's because even if they want to do so, they aren't able to. The light distorts the view, so the island isn't actually where it appears to be. If you sail in the direction you see, you'll never reach it. In fact, you'd likely end up moving further away instead."

"Is this the Sea Emperor's doing?" Xia Chichi inquired.

"No, this phenomenon has always been here." Hai Pinglan smiled slightly. "If it were the Sea Emperor's doing, then why would your father send you here? Clearly, it's something inherently extraordinary, something favorable and beneficial for you."

Xia Chichi asked, “But the Sea Emperor is occupying it now?”

Hai Pinglan nodded. “Most likely. This also includes obscuring the records of certain figures on the Tome of Troubled Times. The root of it all lies here.”

Xia Chichi was curious. “What do you mean?”

“It’s called the Heavenly Tome. The page here is similar to the Tome of Troubled Times in that they’re both pages of the Heavenly Tome, but their purposes differ from one another.” Hai Pinglan shrugged. “Though I’ve never seen it myself, I’d bet your father has a page. Otherwise, there’s no way for him to be so powerful. By the same logic, your lover might also have a page... His ability to become the best among the flowers isn’t something that can be accomplished through talent alone.”

His words carried a subtle hint of provocation—suggesting that her father, as well as even her lover, had kept secrets from her. As if she was a poor, naive child left in the dark.

Xia Chichi merely smiled faintly, unaffected by his words. She had been there when Zhao Changhe obtained the golden foil. She was fully aware of its mysterious nature, but she had never paid much attention to it. If anything was a page of the Heavenly Tome, the golden foil was that thing. It fit the bill perfectly, both in appearance and the place it was found. She had always known.

Facing the sea breeze, Xia Chichi tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, saying leisurely, “Even if others possess it, they wouldn’t have been able to become the best among the flowers. An external artifact is just that, an external aid. One’s own strength always remains the foundation. If you cannot see past this, uncle, then I’m sorry to say that you disappoint me.”

“Hah...” Hai Pinglan chuckled. “Possessing a treasure can be both a blessing and a curse. Fortune and misfortune have always been intertwined. The more people who come to believe that your man holds the Heavenly Tome, the more he’ll have to prove whether fate truly is on his side.”

“Are you interested in taking it?”

“I have no intention of stirring up unnecessary trouble, at least not until this matter is resolved. The real threat to me is the Sea Emperor. If he finds out your man has another page of the Heavenly Tome, he might do anything in his power to seize it.”

“So you brought this up here, within such close proximity, to alert the Sea Emperor?”

Hai Pinglan chuckled dismissively. “Come on, I’m not that petty. In fact, now that I’m here, the Sea Emperor likely won’t know anything. I have my ways... Of course, I won’t be entering the island’s boundary; that’s for you to do.”

With that, the ship came to a stop.

Xia Chichi turned to look at him, showing no displeasure about being used as bait. Instead, she said, “No matter what, you brought me here, so thank you.”

Hai Pinglan smiled faintly and remained silent.

Xia Chichi asked, “Since you won’t be guiding me in, and you’ve said others won’t be able to find their way, how am I supposed to reach the island?”

Hai Pinglan replied, “What is your true purpose in coming here?”

Xia Chichi answered, “To cultivate and understand the will of the Azure Dragon.”

“There you go. You came here to cultivate, not simply to find an island. The process of finding it is also a part of your cultivation. You don’t need guidance, and it especially shouldn’t be coming from me.”

“You’re right.” Xia Chichi stopped worrying. She leaped into the air, treading the waves, and in an instant, she had entered the area of distorted light.

As soon as she entered, those on the ship lost sight of her, her figure obscured by the distorted light.

Hai Pinglan, however, seemed able to see her, watching her back as she disappeared into the haze. He sighed. “The young surpass the old like the waves of the Yangtze. If this girl doesn’t fall, her future is limitless...”

Meanwhile, Xia Chichi strode across the waves. Though the island seemed just ahead, no matter how she advanced, it did not seem to draw any closer. Step after step, even as she neared exhaustion, the island's distance appeared unchanged, as if it lay beyond her reach.

Xia Chichi swam quietly, her body half-submerged in the sea, her mind calm as she attuned herself to the surrounding environment. If this distorted area was not created by the Sea Emperor but was instead formed due to the Heavenly Tome, what aspect was this page emphasizing?

Could it be light?

She looked up at the sky. The sun had already dipped beneath the horizon, and the stars and moon began to shine above. Yet the rainbow bridge still lingered, almost like an illusion.

What's the rainbow bridge? Is it also light?

If everything here's connected to light, then what does it have to do with the four idols? At the very least, what does it have to do with the will of the Azure Dragon?

From what I know, the will of the Azure Dragon isn't that related to water. Instead, it should be more associated with the element of wood, and it certainly has no direct link to light.

But if there's any connection, then it would be the constellation of the Azure Dragon in the sky, something that people perceive as starlight.

Suddenly, Xia Chichi recalled Xia Longyuan's manipulation of the stars and shifting of the heavens. He had only manipulated an illusionary sky, so how could it change what people saw in reality? How could a single punch from him, over a thousand li away, directly impact the battlefield in Puyang?

Xia Chichi lifted her gaze to the Azure Dragon constellation above. What should have been a distant, unreachable array of stars now shifted within this strange refractive atmosphere—sometimes the stars appeared distant, and sometimes they seemed to hover right before her as if they were close enough to touch.

She fixed her gaze on the heart of the Azure Dragon, the mansion of Xin, the core star that blazed like a beacon. With a sudden resolve, she closed her eyes and stepped upon the waves.

With a single spin, she found herself upon the rainbow bridge, somehow crossing an unfathomable distance to reach it.

Hai Pinglan drew in a deep breath. “She truly is a prodigy.”

This place was not an illusion. It was simply light bent into disarray. Knowing that fact was one thing, but actually discerning the true location was another matter entirely. It was not something easily achieved. With everyone’s cultivation foundation differing, even Hai Pinglan did not understand how Xia Chichi saw through it.

But she had, indeed, seen through it. In the eyes of others, she appeared to step onto a rainbow bridge, but in reality, Xia Chichi had already stepped onto the island itself.

Yes, what seemed like her treading upon the rainbow was her actually landing on the island. In front of her were several figures—armored, trident-wielding fishmen, their expressions fierce as they aimed their weapons at her.

One of the fishmen snarled and asked, “Who are you, human? Have you come to meet your death?”

Xia Chichi did not even bother to look at them. Her gaze wandered across the island, and her brow furrowed slightly. The island was vast, its end nowhere in sight. Far away, mountain peaks rose, cloaked in endless forests. She could not tell how far it extended.

Whoosh!

The fishmen, angered by her lack of response, attacked. A multitude of steel tridents lunged toward Xia Chichi’s vital points.

She twisted slightly, her body seeming to glide effortlessly as the tridents missed her entirely. Her sword, Iceheart, flashed through the air.

Though her sword appeared to strike nothing but air, a spray of blood erupted simultaneously from all of the fishmen’s throats, and they fell in unison. In death, they reverted to ordinary fish, flopping down and plunging into the sea with a splash.

Xia Chichi took a deep breath. This place felt as if it was more than just a matter of refracted light. It was like a dreamscape, and no matter how she looked at it, it felt utterly unreal.

Chapter 573: The Lake at the Island's Heart

Xia Chichi had not been part of any of the earlier battles that had taken place between the Sea Tribe and the pirates, so this was her first time encountering these fishmen. They looked like monsters and even reverted to their original forms before leaping back into the sea. She wondered if they were edible...

Whatever this island had been originally, it was now clearly the territory of these fishmen. Whether the Sea Emperor was on the island or lurking beneath the ocean, she could not say for sure.

She had initially expected to come to a remote island with unique features for secluded cultivation, but it was turning into a solo raid through enemy lines.

A wry smile tugged at her lips. She realized that her value right now mainly lay in luring the Sea Emperor out into the open. Whether it was Hai Pinglan or Xia Longyuan, both seemed to have their own schemes, hoping that once the Sea Emperor showed himself, he would be caught between two powerful foes.

But the question remained, what was it about her that would draw the Sea Emperor out? Was there not some powerful leader among the fishmen, perhaps some king powerful enough that the Sea Emperor would not even need to appear?

She felt a small flicker of realization. It's possible that this isn't a part of Xia Longyuan's plan at all...

If Xia Longyuan truly intended for her to lure out the Sea Emperor by killing the fishmen, he would have sent someone more reliable, like Cui Wenjing when he was still around, or perhaps Tang Wanzhuang, Maquis of Wuping Qin Dingjiang, or Huangfu Yongxian. They were all loyal and experienced leaders who were either a part of or had ties to the imperial court. They were trustworthy, well-trained, and accustomed to executing plans flawlessly.

Was Xia Longyuan worried they'd fail, or that it would compromise the empire's standing? But since when has he concerned himself with such things?

What was the point of using “training and breakthrough” as an excuse to send her here? He could not control her thoughts, nor could he control the Four Idols Cult. If she deemed the place too dangerous, she could simply choose not to come. Any grand scheme would be for nothing, and it was pure chance that she ended up here anyway, forcibly brought along by Hai Pinglan. Originally, she had intended to rendezvous with her darling husband in Penglai, something that had obviously no longer happened. Her arrival here was hardly part of anyone’s well-laid plans.

The only possible explanation was that there was something here that could only be unlocked by her or someone from the Four Idols Cult.

If that were the case, even if she intentionally walked into the fishmen’s tridents, Xia Longyuan or Hai Pinglan would surely intervene to save her.

Suddenly, Xia Chichi let out a chuckle, a carefree sound that echoed as she headed leisurely toward the distant mountains.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

Several arrows came at her from the left and right, aimed straight at her face despite the wide-open space where no enemies could be seen.

Xia Chichi remained perfectly still, even raising her neck slightly as if offering herself up for slaughter.

The arrows seemed to hit an invisible barrier, grazing harmlessly past her, not even ruffling her clothes.

Her sword, Iceheart, moved without any discernible prompt. It launched a sudden strike, its blade singing through the air as it cut across the distant landscape, followed by cries of pain.

Then a familiar voice roared in her ear, Xia Longyuan’s anger almost tangible, “What do you think you’re doing?!”

Xia Chichi chuckled playfully. “Just as I thought.”

Xia Longyuan roared in frustration, “And what if you had been wrong? You would be dead!”

Xia Chichi sneered and said, "Is one worthless life really all that important? If my death could make the plans of the so-called greatest man fall apart, well, wouldn't that be quite something?"

"You!" Xia Longyuan, perhaps for the first time in decades, found himself so utterly stifled that he could not find the right words to rebuke her. Eventually, it all boiled down to an exasperated phrase from the Zhao Family dialect. "Man, you're a freaking motor-mouth... and you've also got a black heart."

Xia Chichi, of course, did not really understand it entirely, but she still replied, "Who's really the one with a black heart between us? You're the one using your daughter as bait!"

"Forget it. I can't be bothered to argue with you," Xia Longyuan muttered to himself, thinking that the Four Idols Cult truly lived up to its reputation as a demonic cult. The way that their saintess so easily disregarded her own life was unsettling, to say the least. Not only that, but who knows what she might have done with that Zhao brat all those years ago? She clearly has no concept of self-respect, acting like a headstrong delinquent.

But who was to blame, really? He had never been a part of her upbringing. She truly was a child with a mother but no father to guide her, and that was not even an insult. He certainly could not fault the Luo Family's family head either; the man had been looking up at the grass for years now.

All he could do was let out a heavy sigh, the only overt manifestation of the frustration he was forced to swallow. "Regardless of any of the schemes at play, as your father, I wouldn't just let you get hurt. But you must take responsibility for your own life. My watching over you from afar may not be as immediate as you think. If something goes wrong, it'll be too late for regrets, so be careful."

His voice gradually faded and disappeared, leaving behind only silence.

Xia Chichi was stunned for a while, taken aback by Xia Longyuan referring to himself as her father. The words evoked a complexity of feelings within her.

Perhaps Xia Longyuan's intervention had not necessarily exposed his presence, and maybe it did not affect his broader plans much, but he had indeed taken a risk. He had acted out of fear for her safety.

One could argue that she should not read too much into it, that he was merely concerned about his plans going awry. But everyone had their schemes, and it was Xia Longyuan, not Hai Pinglan, who had acted.

This instinctive, subconscious reaction could reveal something deeper—perhaps Xia Longyuan was not as ruthless as people imagined or even as cold-hearted as he himself believed.

Xia Chichi pursed her lips and turned her gaze back to the scene.

The fishmen who had fired the arrows lay dead, but there was no sign of their bodies. Bloodstains inexplicably appeared from entirely unrelated directions.

Everything here was a chaotic visual illusion, and relying on her own abilities to get through this place would indeed be a rigorous challenge. It was a test of her perception, of her understanding of light and space, a journey to sharpen her insight into the essence of things.

With a light tap of her toes, Xia Chichi propelled herself onward, gliding gracefully under the moonlight.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

Once more, countless arrows came flying at her like a dense swarm, stronger and more numerous than before. It seemed like a larger fishman force had noticed her intrusion and was mobilized for a full-scale attack.

Xia Chichi moved with an almost imperceptible shift of her feet, dancing effortlessly between the arrows.

The path of the arrows was strange beyond belief. When Xia Longyuan had intervened, it had seemed almost effortless for him to ward them off, but now that it was her turn, she realized just how difficult they were to dodge. What appeared distant would suddenly be at her throat, while what seemed within reach would miss entirely.

For an ordinary person, being caught in such a storm of arrows would have spelled their death. But Xia Chichi moved lightly, her silhouette dancing between the descending arrows.

Under the dim moonlight, her white garments glowed like snow, her movements resembling the dance of a fairy.

Even the distant fishmen were entranced by her ethereal beauty, which seemed to transcend species.

A commanding voice called out, “Who dares trespass on Skyrim Island[1]?!”

“Oh, so this place has a name? Skyrim... A fitting name. I’m looking for the edge of the sky,” Xia Chichi said with a playful smile. “I heard there’s a place here where you can watch the sun rise... What do you say? Name your terms.”

“You wish to go to Sunrise Altar? That’s simple.” The fishman leader’s voice came through the sea mist, drifting and difficult to locate. “You can watch the sun rise from my bed or from inside my stomach—your choice.”

Xia Chichi’s smile remained, but her voice turned cold as frost. “I see, so you wish to die.”

Whoosh!

Iceheart suddenly stabbed into the empty air beside her, slicing open a crabman far in the distance.

Xia Chichi’s movements were swift, ghostly. She shifted instantly to her right. A heavy clang followed, and a massive double-bladed halberd[2] smashed down where she had just stood, carving a deep gouge into the earth.

Yet despite her quick movements, the halberd still grazed her arm, leaving a wound that dripped blood.

This battle... is going to be incredibly difficult.

Even the native fishmen had not fully adapted to the distorted environment of the island, so how could any human, no matter how talented, truly be prepared for it?

“Stay here!” The fishman leader’s halberd swept toward her again. Xia Chichi’s eyes flashed coldly as she raised her sword to parry, using the force to leap away toward a large tree nearby and crashing into it.

“Stop her!” Voiced shouted in panic all around her.

Xia Chichi collided with the tree trunk, vanishing from sight in an instant.

To the eye, the land ahead seemed to stretch into a range of distant mountains, but upon her impact, the mountains themselves seemed to vanish. In reality, the island was much smaller than it seemed. At the very least, the island was far from the vast expanse it appeared to be.

There were indeed some trees, though they were sparsely distributed. At the heart of these scattered woods lay a central lake, around which the trees seemed to stand guard. On the lake stood a platform of unknown material adorned with a sculpture of the Azure Dragon rising from the water and ascending to the heavens.

Is this the Sunrise Altar that fishman was talking about?

Standing at the edge of the lake, Xia Chichi noticed that the strange distortion in her sight seemed to ease. Although her vision was still yet to be entirely clear, she could make out the surrounding scenery in a dreamlike haze.

Around the lake, countless fishmen had lit bonfires and seemed to be conducting some sort of special ritual. Many fishermen—human captives—were strung up at the center of the lake, flayed open and disemboweled, their blood staining the water red.

These fishermen almost certainly came from the group of fishermen who were praying outside. Who knew how many of them had been captured and brought here as sacrifice?

Xia Chichi’s gaze grew colder, filled with icy resolve. Even without any other motivation, a race that was fundamentally at odds with humanity could not be allowed to thrive.

With the ritual disrupted, countless fishmen let out shrill cries, charging at Xia Chichi from all directions. Behind her, the fishman commander was also furious, the halberd in his hands swinging directly at her neck once more.

Simultaneously, a figure rose from the lake. It was a water construct. It sent a torrent of water toward Xia Chichi's chest.

Surrounded on all sides, Xia Chichi spun swiftly, attempting to evade, but suddenly, her head buzzed, a mysterious whisper echoing within her mind, and everything around her grew increasingly blurry.

An unknown force intervened, quickly dispelling the effect.

"Damn it..." Although it seemed that Xia Longyuan had intervened again, the brief moment of hesitation was enough—the torrent of water reached her, and she had no time to dodge.

Xia Chichi raised her sword across in a desperate parry, but a polearm still managed to make its way toward her neck.

She rolled quickly, the weapon grazing her head, slicing away a few locks of her hair.

Around her, countless blades and tridents stabbed down fiercely. Xia Chichi swung her sword while rolling, narrowly escaping death, moment after moment.

Is Xia Longyuan going to intervene now? Or maybe Hai Pinglan?

Clang!

Xia Chichi strained against the incoming trident, the stench of the fishman's breath almost overwhelming her. "No one can save you, beautiful one—surrender to your fate and become my meal!"

With no one coming to her aid, Xia Chichi instead made her move. Iceheart's blade suddenly extended, edge jagged with icy spikes, impaling the fishman's mouth.

Taking advantage of the wounded leader's howl of pain, Xia Chichi rolled away again, then sprang up to perch upon a tree branch.

She could rely on no one. She had to rely on herself.

Her eyes landed on the sculpture on the lake. Deep down, she knew that it was connected to the Four Idols Cult. She could feel an intimate call from it, a resonance imprinted deep in her blood.

But how can I get close to it?

Surveying her surroundings, an unending sea of fishmen gathered beneath the trees, lunging at her from every direction, while in front of her, the tenacious polearm lingered like a deadly shadow. The water figure seemed to have used a special trapping technique, sealing off the surrounding area with water bubbles.

Xia Chichi deflected the polearm again, her lithe waist arching back under the force.

What should I do?

The fishman leader grinned menacingly, baring its sharp teeth once again.

Suddenly, a powerful force tore through the air. An enormous bolt, like a gigantic arrow, pierced through the fishman leader's head, shattering it to pieces.

A ballista bolt! Where did it come from?

Xia Chichi's eyes widened and her spirits instantly lifted. She watched as the bolt continued on its trajectory, taking out several more fishmen before burying itself into a massive boulder.

Then, from the spot where the bolt had landed, a blood-red saber flashed, slashing straight for the water figure in the lake. "Fuck off and die!"

Even Xia Longyuan, who was preparing to intervene from the distant imperial palace, was left dumbstruck. When did this guy get here?

Xia Chichi stared at the figure in a daze. The smile that spread across her face was breathtakingly beautiful, lighting up her entire being.

Chapter 574: The Third Battle Against a Water Construct

When Zhao Changhe reached the outskirts of Skyrim Island, he actually had a much better sense of orientation of everything compared to Xia Chichi.

Having studied the Water Mirror Technique along the way, a technique that involved the refraction of light, and with two years of experience using the Spring Water Sword Art, he was well-prepared.

Upon first sighting the island, Zhao Changhe's gaze was already penetrating the shimmering mist and the distorted light, perceiving the true contours of the island. He could see that the island was nowhere near as large as it appeared from the outside.

One feature, however, was quite distinctive. Although the sun had already set, with the moon now risen, a rainbow-colored bridge still hung in the sky, almost as if it was painted across the heavens.

"That rainbow bridge seems... off." Zhao Changhe looked toward it, then asked Lady Three, "Doesn't it almost seem to say that stepping on the bridge would lead you to the heavens?"

Lady Three responded, "From the perspective of light refraction, if you step onto the island, it might indeed look like you're stepping onto the bridge from the outside. It carries symbolic meaning—stepping onto it means reaching the edge of the sky."

Is the edge of the sky far away? No. When you are at the edge of the world, how far could it be?

A faint poetic feeling welled up in Zhao Changhe's heart, but Lady Three interrupted it. "This place is strange... The will of the Azure Dragon has never had much connection to water. Earlier, when we considered the concept of water nurturing wood and the position of Azure Dragon in the east, we let Xia Chichi venture to sea for some enlightenment. However, the will of Azure Dragon should not be something one searches for in the water. So how come that I feel such an intense connection to it?"

Zhao Changhe also found it odd. But for him, it was not about water or wood. Instead, he thought that anything related to the Azure Dragon had already been uncovered. The fake Azure Dragon's tomb had been excavated under the guidance of Xia Chichi's mother, and Zhao Changhe himself, along with Chichi, had found the Azure Dragon Seal behind the waterfall. They had solved the altar mechanism under that seal, obtaining the Rejuvenation Art from there and even taking the coffin away. According to Lady Three, that coffin had indeed held the remains of the ancient Azure Dragon.

They had scoured everything thoroughly, and yet there was still more about the Azure Dragon here.

Lady Three looked up at the sky, where the Azure Dragon constellation twinkled faintly in the east. “Perhaps it refers to the essence of the constellation, not the essence of the ancient Azure Dragon.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. The essence of the ancient Azure Dragon obviously came from its connection to the stars. It did not just appear out of nowhere. If what could be obtained here was the essence of the constellation, then it would mean gaining insight into the original source of that power.

No wonder Xia Longyuan wanted his daughter to seek a breakthrough here. This truly was an exceptional opportunity that could allow her to glimpse the third layer of the Profound Mysteries in a relatively short time.

The condition, however, was that she could comprehend it. Offering someone the opportunity to read an academic paper from the Chinese Academy of Sciences would not do them much good if they could not understand it.

While they discussed this, Tang En was steering the ship closer to the distorted light.

Zhao Changhe had initially intended to have Tang En pause briefly to observe and perhaps even question the nearby fishing boats. But as they neared, he noticed movement on the island.

A figure in white danced across the treetops under the moonlight, as graceful as a fairy.

Zhao Changhe was utterly entranced, unable to look away.

Chichi... Every reunion with her seems to bring a new, breathtaking feeling, and this time, she’s giving off a sense of loneliness and resolute determination.

When a person stands upon the horizon—how, then, could the horizon be far away?

Lady Three glanced at him, her chest filled with a sour feeling. She did not even know how to express her jealousy.

Of all things, Xia Chichi was certainly not lagging when it came to getting to know Zhao Changhe and falling in love. She was undoubtedly the first. For the longest time, Xia Chichi had been the only one he thought of as his girlfriend. Now, seeing the tenderness in his gaze, it was as if he was looking at his first love all over again. No wonder Vermillion Bird could not stand Xia Chichi. It was not a competition that she could win, so she could only bully her to soothe her own heart.

Lady Three sighed. “You...”

Before she could say anything further, Zhao Changhe suddenly erupted in anger, “Damn it! Chichi isn’t exploring! She’s being hunted! Who the hell dares to attack my Chichi?!”

Lady Three: “...”

“Tang En! Ballista!”

“Uh... Your Highness, we can’t see anything from here.”

“You don’t need to see anything. Just shoot in that direction!”

Lady Three frowned slightly. Her cultivation was much more advanced than Zhao Changhe’s, and she could sense malicious presences all around them, but nothing detailed enough to identify. Charging in recklessly did not seem like the best option. Strange... Xia Chichi is usually very cautious. How did she end up in such a dangerous and isolated battle?

Still, there was no way she could or would stop Zhao Changhe from rushing to Xia Chichi’s aid. The very purpose of her journey was to protect Xia Chichi, after all. If it came to it, she would even give her life to ensure Xia Chichi’s safety.

Tang En and the crew adjusted one of the ballistae, but they had no means to aim precisely. They just followed Zhao Changhe’s directive, firing blindly in the direction he told them to.

With a heavy twang, the ballista bolt was released, and Zhao Changhe vanished.

Tang En blinked, bewildered. “?”

Lady Three shook her head. “He rode the ballista bolt. You should all find a safe place to hide. This battle is going to be dangerous.”

Before her words had fully settled, she disappeared as well.

Tang En: “...”

What in the world?! Most of the time, she seems as lazy as a tortoise, but now that she’s gotten serious, she’s running like a rabbit! I couldn’t even see her movements! Is she even stronger than the young lady?

* * *

Zhao Changhe adjusted the trajectory of the ballista bolt slightly as he rode it, making sure it perfectly skewered the fishman leader’s head when it entered the battle. Then, without stopping for even a moment, he leaped off the bolt and flew towards the water figure at the heart of the lake.

After battling at sea so many times, he was acutely aware that wherever sea creatures gathered, a water construct was always the core. While it could move on its own, the Sea Emperor used it as his eyes and ears, and could even act through it. Going straight for this thing was always the best choice.

A water construct had power that rivaled those at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, but after these recent battles, Zhao Changhe understood that it was not as formidable as a human expert that was genuinely at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Constructs, after all, were constructs. They lacked the awareness and adaptability of a living being.

Recently, Zhao Changhe had made significant progress in his mastery of water.

In his first encounter with a water construct on Taiping Island, his saber had produced no noticeable impact when it slashed at the water figure. He failed to do any damage, his effort futile.

In his second encounter with a water construct on Dongan Island, his saber had found purchase, though the backlash was still overwhelming, and he had left the real fighting to Lady Three, focusing instead on facing Hai Changkong.

And now, this was his third encounter.

“Zhao Changhe... Why do you have to show up every time?” The newly-formed water construct actually recognized who he was and, without underestimating him, swiftly moved to deflect his saber.

Ripples spread out from the impact. Although Zhao Changhe’s saber did not quite manage to cut through, he was not pushed back either.

His left hand, wielding Dragon Emperor, formed a subtle circle to block the water construct’s scattered water droplets, leaving no gaps that the other party could use to give him any trouble.

Simultaneously, the same invasive whispers that Xia Chichi had experienced earlier echoed within Zhao Changhe’s soul sea, trying to unsettle him, wrapping around his thoughts like a tightening curse.

But within his soul sea, a small figure sitting cross-legged—one that Lady Three often held and played with, but had grown significantly stronger—opened its eyes.

An invisible ripple spread throughout Zhao Changhe’s soul sea, dispelling the strange symbols that had surrounded him and erasing their effects.

Faced with the Sea Emperor’s most troublesome mental attack, Zhao Changhe resisted!

Both offensively and defensively, they were evenly matched!

Xia Chichi, still standing on the branches of a tree, watched in stunned silence. Since when did Changhe get so powerful? Not only could he easily see through the distorted light, he’s even holding his own against this water thing!

The water construct had displayed pure, overwhelming power, yet Zhao Changhe seemed to be able to fight toe to toe with it.

Could he have already reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries?

Just then, Zhao Changhe's voice reached her ears. "Don't just stand there. I'll keep this thing occupied. You focus on dealing with the fishmen and figuring out what to do with that statue at the center of the lake. This battle is complicated, and whether we can take control depends on how well the Azure Dragon Saintess can perform..."

Xia Chichi snapped back to attention. Iceheart swung out, slashing the throat of an attacking fishman. In the next instant, she leaped, skimming across the water straight toward the heart of the lake.

The water construct pointed in her direction.

A massive wave surged from the center of the lake, rushing toward Xia Chichi.

Boom!

Zhao Changhe stored his saber and threw a punch. "Your opponent is me!"

The massive wave halted and then shattered into a mist that filled the air.

Xia Chichi passed through the mist, her gaze fixed on the statue.

Xia Longyuan watched in silence. Ever since Xia Chichi had gone to the capital, he had never seen his daughter with such a carefree, joyous smile. Even in the midst of a battle, she seemed to be gracefully strolling through a serene evening.

"This young man is Zhao Changhe?" muttered Hai Pinglan, hidden somewhere unseen. "His understanding of water... It's like he's lived on the sea for twenty years. And that punch—why does it resemble my fist art, the Furious Sea Raging Waves Fist[1]? Where did he learn it?"

Chapter 575: A Golden Cicada Sheds Its Shell

The water construct appeared to be a humanoid figure formed entirely of water, but its power manifested in a manner entirely different from human physical strength and true qi. It was not like the feeble water elementals summoned by Western mages, nor did it need to transform itself into waves.

Within it, there existed a boundless ocean, as vast and deep as the true sea, and with an equally crushing pressure. No matter how hard an ordinary person struck it, they would fail to deal any damage, and they may even hurt themselves from the recoil. In contrast, a casual wave of its hand could unleash devastating, colossal waves, overwhelming and unstoppable by ordinary human strength.

When one threw a punch and it responded in kind, the clash was a test of human flesh and true qi against something akin to the depths of the ocean. Every one of its movements was effectively a spell, a kind of water magic. Each drop of water it sent out could be deadly, while the mist it raised could act as a prison, either crushing a person to a pulp under pressure or sealing off their nose and mouth, suffocating them. With a single thought, it could draw moisture from inside its enemy, a trick like the one it used on Cui Wenjing, destroying the body from within.

It did not need to chant or gesture—its very nature aligned with what Xia Longyuan had described as a natural caster. Every single one of its movements was an embodiment of water magic itself.

Ever since Zhao Changhe set sail, he had been contemplating this issue. Starting from his encounters with Hua Zhenming and with the Black Tortoise inheritance obtained from Lady Three, he had trained day in and day out, punching waves and breaking currents at the depths of the ocean. And now, he had finally achieved some capabilities against water.

When a single punch could break a massive wave, it mattered not if the wave took human form or the form of a tortoise—there was no longer any difference. No matter what tricks were being pulled, with enough preparation, all tricks became futile.

His saber turned into a blood-red arc, striking down from above. Simultaneously, his sword turned into a golden arrow, piercing through the rainbow bridge and reaching the moon itself.

It was almost as if the blood-red arc had a line cutting through its center, creating an image similar to the Taiji.

Every time they clashed, the sound of crashing waves reverberated. It was as if countless turbulent waves were crashing upon the shore, splashing water in all directions. The water splattered onto the approaching fishmen, penetrating their bodies, leaving them dead or maimed.

Against such a lifeform, Zhao Changhe's usual techniques had limited effectiveness. He could not manipulate the vicious qi within the water elemental, nor could he evoke fear. It all came down to his understanding of water and his mastery over energy.

Yet he managed to fight it to a standstill.

The water construct roared in frustration but could not break through Zhao Changhe's defense to reach Xia Chichi. In a moment of carelessness, it even got stabbed in the abdomen, the water within gushing out.

Zhao Changhe chuckled. "Hoh, so you can be wounded... Losing energy is your version of losing blood, and from the looks of it, you can't replenish your energy faster than you're expending it. It looks like the Sea Emperor's tech still has issues with energy efficiency, eh?"

Roar!

Dragon Bird swung in a fierce sweep, a crescent slash cutting across the lake's surface, raising massive waves.

With the water construct distracted, Xia Chichi no longer faced any real threats. She weaved through the frenzied attacks of the fishmen around her. While her right hand parried their wild attacks, her left hand touched the Azure Dragon sculpture, attempting to use her Azure Dragon Divine Art.

At that moment, a thunderous roar seemed to erupt within her mind, leaving her with the sense that her vision was being expanded far beyond its usual limits.

She could not tell if the Azure Dragon constellation in the sky was descending toward the ground or if she herself was ascending, climbing the rainbow bridge into the celestial dome, gazing closely at the shifting stars.

It seemed that the stars representing the Azure Dragon constellation connected into one unified whole, and then... they began to move.

They took on the form of a dragon, winding and twisting in front of her.

And within her soul sea, the star chart that had been illuminated by her Azure Dragon Divine Art was also drawn along, moving in unison with it. What happened in her soul sea itself was even

more mystical as a dragon appeared to be swimming through it, as if overlooking the world beneath it.

But then... that was all that happened.

For some unknown reason, it seemed to be only a change in form. She gained no further insights, nor did she feel any increase in power. It felt as if her cultivation of the Azure Dragon Divine art had just triggered some kind of identity verification yet held no deeper significance.

What's the point of just being able to look at a dragon? If this is all there is, then I could have just looked three cun below Zhao Changhe's navel. What am I missing?

Xia Chichi was not discouraged. It was normal for such things to be difficult to decipher. If it were easy, they would not still be using such primitive, brutal sacrificial rituals. In fact, they were not even offering these sacrifices to the sculpture but rather to the Sea Emperor. Their aim was to help the Sea Emperor recover to his full strength so that he could then violently obtain the secrets here.

Even the Sea Emperor, powerful though he was, had been unable to access these things, which was why the secrets here were still undiscovered. This was the reason why Xia Longyuan had sent her here.

Xia Chichi then recalled how Zhao Changhe unlocked the mechanism for the cave behind the waterfall back at Beimang, and she realized that the same may apply here. Iceheart flicked around her fingers, and she suddenly slashed open her left palm.

Blood smeared across the Azure Dragon sculpture, and it began to emit a faint golden light.

A reaction!

Xia Chichi looked back up at the sky and then inward at her soul sea, comparing the differences.

The dragon in her soul sea was connected to her alone, corresponding to her personal cultivation, and reflecting her understanding and conceptualization of the Azure Dragon constellation. However, the dragon in the sky was an external manifestation of this place, and there had to be something off about it.

The direction of her thoughts was indeed correct... Xia Chichi found a subtle but crucial difference.

In her soul sea, the star corresponding to the heart of the dragon, the mansion of Xin, glowed especially brightly.

The dragon in the sky, however, had all its stars glowing at equal brightness. At first glance, it seemed perfectly normal, but in truth, this uniformity was precisely what was off.

The star that should have corresponded to the mansion of Xin seemed to be missing for the dragon in the sky.

If I restore it, would that reveal the secrets of this place?

Xia Chichi gently caressed the statue. After countless years of erosion, it was rough and abstract, with no clear slots for embedding anything. She paused for a moment, reaching into her robes to grasp the Azure Dragon Seal that she and Zhao Changhe had once obtained together.

If she had anything that could be called the heart of the Azure Dragon, it would most likely be this seal. Though the statue was covered in dents and crevices, it did not require searching for the exact place to fit it—it just needed its heart to be restored.

It was a puzzle too abstract for outsiders to comprehend. Furthermore, even if they did figure it out, nobody else possessed the Azure Dragon Seal.

Xia Chichi was nearly certain that this was the answer.

She glanced up. Zhao Changhe was still in the midst of a fierce battle with the water construct, and she hesitated.

Zhao Changhe had said that she could perhaps help them gain the upper hand by figuring out what to do with the statue. While that might be true, the specific outcome that would come from completing the statue was unpredictable.

It was certain that if she chose not to solve it, nothing further would happen. However, once the riddle was solved, the Sea Emperor would not remain idle, and the moment Xia Longyuan and Hai Pinglan had been waiting for would come. The situation would quickly spiral beyond their control.

This place would then become a true battlefield of gods and demons, and that was not something they could handle simply by being in possession of some special artifact.

But if she did not solve it, would simply turning away do them any good?

Why do we always have to be pawns, bait for others...

When she was alone, it was impossible to act freely, but now her husband had arrived and she was not on her own anymore. Zhao Changhe had become so powerful that maybe, just maybe, they could find a way to turn the tables...

Xia Chichi's eyes flickered, and she suddenly murmured aloud, "My blood on the statue made it glow. Did you all see that?"

Those watching from the shadows shared the same unspoken thought: what is she planning on doing now?

"The statue is already primed. Now, all it lacks is the key. From now on, anyone can open it... that is, as long as they have the key." Xia Chichi slowly retreated from the lake. Then, she pulled out the Azure Dragon Seal and threw it into the air. "Here is the key! Feel free to fight for it amongst yourselves!"

As if they were of one mind, just as Xia Chichi threw the seal, Zhao Changhe forced the water construct back with a powerful strike, using the momentum to retreat rapidly. In the blink of an eye, he landed beside Xia Chichi.

The couple naturally clasped hands and fled together.

Without a single word exchanged, they knew each other's intentions perfectly. By the time they were both clear of the lake, the Azure Dragon Seal had not even reached the apex of its arc yet...

The very next moment after they left, a dragon's roar resounded from somewhere, and the water construct that had been contending with Zhao Changhe suddenly transformed into a water dragon, rushing straight toward the Azure Dragon Seal.

A golden fist appeared in the air, punching the water dragon viciously.

The grand phenomenon everyone had anticipated had not even been triggered yet, but the drama had already unfolded. The intended protagonists had left, hand in hand, stepping under the moon away from the island.

Boom!

The island began to tremble violently, and it was unknown what kind of battle had erupted inside. Bright lights pierced the heavens, thick clouds obscured the stars, and the world fell into darkness as thunder roared and lightning flashed.

Chapter 576: Battle of the Gods

Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi raced out from the island, plunging directly into the sea.

Xia Chichi was filled with joy, an overwhelming happiness that persisted despite the lingering danger of their surroundings. She had expected Zhao Changhe to be headed for Penglai, yet here he was appearing like a knight in shining armor just when she was at her weakest, just when she needed help the most. He had shielded her from every crisis, allowing her to explore freely, turning the tide from being forced into the role of bait to regaining some control.

Splash!

Their heads surfaced from the water, covered in seaweed. In the distorted moonlight, even Tang En, who was sailing close by, wouldn't necessarily notice them.

The two glanced at each other, both on the verge of laughter, but given the tense situation, they knew they could not just burst out laughing.

Behind them, as they fled, the island began to collapse. Screams filled the air as the remaining fishmen on the island tumbled into the sea. Rocks shattered and smashed into the fishmen, and in just a moment, the sea became littered with corpses, evoking thoughts in Zhao Changhe of the cataclysmic end of an era.

But for now, neither of them had the leisure to dwell on it.

As the island collapsed and stones flew in all directions, a massive flood dragon revealed itself and surged into the sky.

The supposed island with a central lake and a statue within the lake had never truly existed.

The statue had always been drifting in the sea, or maybe it had actually been hidden in the depths before something eventually pushed it up to the surface. The massive flood dragon had coiled itself around the statue, perhaps guarding it or seeking enlightenment, and over time, its body came to accumulate thick layers of soil, forming what looked like an island.

With the flood dragon moving, the island ceased to exist.

As the flood dragon soared into the sky, a golden dragon-shaped fist shadow struck the water construct that had been fighting with Zhao Changhe earlier, shattering it to pieces, crystal core included.

Seizing the moment, the flood dragon bit down on the fist, as if a large dragon was devouring a smaller one. A deep, stentorian voice then reverberated from all around. “Xia Longyuan... I’ve been waiting for you.”

Xia Chichi’s heart sank, and even Zhao Changhe was startled.

Is this the Sea Emperor’s true form? A flood dragon... Who would have thought flood dragons truly existed?

He had expected the Sea Emperor to perhaps be a giant octopus, but he actually turned out to be a dragon, at least kind of. Then again, perhaps he had not always been a flood dragon; maybe it had taken over the flood dragon’s body. So far, Zhao Changhe’s experiences showed that the ancient gods and demons who remained active generally no longer had their original physical forms, whereas those with physical forms were either dead or in deep slumber—a divergence between those cultivating their spirit and those focusing on the bodies.

From the Sea Emperor’s tone, it seemed clear that he was aware that Xia Longyuan was trying to lure him out. This was only natural; after Xia Longyuan intervened in the battle with the Cui and Wang clans, Xia Longyuan’s intentions were clear enough, and it would have been odd for the Sea Emperor not to figure it out. Had the Sea Emperor remained oblivious, then his intelligence would hardly befit the title of emperor among the ancient gods and demons.

Just as Xia Longyuan was luring it out, the Sea Emperor was likely trying to draw Xia Longyuan away from the capital. Even if the latter's true body remained in the capital, this confrontation, whether through a projection or some other means, could still impact it.

Xia Longyuan knew this and still continued, a testament to his arrogance.

In the end, strength decided everything. Only the victor could claim to have everything under control.

While Xia Longyuan was undeniably an unrivaled figure in this era, facing a top-tier god from the previous era, one even bearing the title of emperor, who could truly say who would win? Even Zhao Changhe, who had the utmost confidence in Xia Longyuan, was unsure of what the outcome of this battle would be.

The golden dragon-shaped fist clamped in the flood dragon's jaws flickered and transformed into a humanoid figure resembling Xia Longyuan. Though his fist remained in the flood dragon's mouth, he seemed entirely unbothered. Suddenly, the force in his fist surged, delivering a powerful blow deep into the flood dragon's throat.

"You waited for me all this time, only to flaunt your weakness before me?"

The sound of a thunderous explosion resounded, and the couple hiding amongst the seaweed in the water could barely make out what was going on in the battle raging above. They could not discern whether the flood dragon's face was one of agony or delight. Soon after, muffled groans emanated, but the flood dragon's jaws remained firmly clamped around the fist, refusing to let go.

Xia Longyuan's voice, tinged with surprise, sounded again, "Your chest and abdomen are already injured, yet you still refuse to let go... I must say, your bite strength is rather commendable. You've recovered much faster than I anticipated. You must have benefited greatly from spreading your faith through the Wang Clan."

Zhao Changhe, of course, understood that the Sea Emperor's fast recovery was not necessarily due to the spreading of faith. The effects of such a system were gradual, requiring a large population and many years of influence to take hold. The Wang Clan did not yet have such reach. At the same time, even with Hai Changkong's earlier actions that shattered the Sea Emperor's faith, any effect would not be immediate, even if the message had spread by now.

If anything hastened the Sea Emperor's recovery, it had to be the sacrifices. The naval battle just off of Dongan Island had left countless dead, and the offering had already taken effect.

Zhao Changhe could not shake the feeling that Hai Pinglan was pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Although Hai Pinglan, too, wanted the Sea Emperor dead, he seemed willing to help accelerate the Sea Emperor's recovery temporarily, aware that the other party was still not strong enough to rival Xia Longyuan. Such cold and calculating tactics were beyond anything that Zhao Changhe could relate to.

This was a high-stakes game between three rulers... perhaps more.

These thoughts passed through Zhao Changhe's head in an instant; meanwhile, as Xia Longyuan's words fell, a crimson fist shadow descended from the sky, striking toward Xia Longyuan.

Xia Longyuan burst into laughter, "I knew it! You believe yourselves to be gods and demons, yet you've still been forced to conspire and cooperate with one another just to take down what you see as a mere mortal! Hah... Hahaha!"

With his laughter echoing in the air, Xia Longyuan's left hand shot out, unleashing another dragon-shaped punch upward, clashing directly with the crimson fist shadow.

A terrifying explosion rang out, and the shockwave of clashing energies almost injured the young couple spying from afar. They were blasted back a few zhang before managing to stabilize themselves, still unable to make out who had gained the upper hand amidst the tumultuous chaos.

Xia Chichi asked softly, "Who is that?"

Zhao Changhe thought for a moment before replying, "I think it must be the barbarian god of the Grasslands, the one called Tngri. I sensed a vast and savage aura, quite similar to the feeling that Timur gave me."

The Sea Emperor had probably used the Wang Clan as a medium to secretly contact the Grasslands' barbarian god... It was no wonder he had been willing to endure injuries just to keep Xia Longyuan immobile.

Two beings from among the ancient gods and demons, ganging up on the strongest man of the current age!

“You call yourselves gods, but you resort to such tactics. You’re nothing but skeletons from the grave!” Xia Longyuan’s laughter echoed from the battlefield. “Had I been alive in your era, you would not have even had the chance to achieve godhood! You’re all nothing but trash!”

Though his words were scornful, his voice felt ever-so-slightly weaker. And since this was a projection of energy from thousands of li away, this indicated that he had sustained some damage.

Yet as the dust cleared, the flood dragon was revealed to be covered in blood, while the crimson fist shadow had nearly dissipated.

To face gods as a mortal, to fight two as one, and to leave all parties wounded with the ancient gods and demons on the losing end, Xia Longyuan proved that his title as the strongest in the world was well-deserved.

The crimson fist shadow transformed into a humanoid figure, but the voice that came from the figure was very faint. “Xia Longyuan, you are indeed powerful, worthy of your arrogance... But no one is all-knowing. Your obstinance has led you to countless mistakes, and yet you remain ignorant of them.”

Xia Longyuan responded indifferently, “What could you, a barbarian god, possibly know?”

“You unified the world to experience the process of ruling, to use it as your stepping stone to the Profound Control Realm. Now that you’ve mastered the power of controlling rivers and mountains, you no longer care to maintain your rule. It is as if unifying the land was nothing more than a key to you, one that you have chosen to cast aside after opening the door. The only reason you keep the throne now is the conveniences it affords your plans,” Tngri said slowly. “Now, your focus lies solely on gods and demons, on your cultivation, on surpassing all. The world falls further and further into chaos, yet you remain indifferent. Instead, you even seize the opportunity to lure out the gods and demons. The Maitreya Cult, the Four Idols Cult, the Wang Clan... You await the shadows behind them, only to crush them for your amusement.”

Xia Longyuan scoffed but offered no response.

Zhao Changhe, however, knew that this assessment was largely accurate. Xia Longyuan’s ultimate target was never these gods and demons. It was likely that his true target was the blind woman or an even greater entity. But how was he supposed to level up? In this era, he had no real rivals. As

emperor, he could not just wander around exploring secret realms, could he? Doing so would not be any different from isolating himself in the palace and ignoring worldly affairs.

He might as well stay in the palace, where at least he could maintain control over the larger picture.

To him, the chaos spreading across the world was nothing more than a performance, something to observe with amusement. In fact, part of it was deliberately orchestrated by him. His eyes were only on the gods and demons lurking in the shadows, viewing them as stepping stones for his next level, each one a boss in a game to gain experience from.

Just like now.

Xia Longyuan did not respond, and Tngri did not care. This avatar of his was on the verge of dissipating, and it was clear that his true body, wherever it was, had also suffered considerable injuries. If he did not finish speaking now, he would not get another chance.

Slowly, Tngri continued, “But Xia Longyuan, you are mistaken... To treat your path to the level of gods and demons with such disdain and disrespect, discarding it as worthless once crossed—you will inevitably suffer the consequences. You gained enlightenment through your dominion over the world, but when you lose control, your foundation will crumble. Do you not realize this? Do you truly believe that reclaiming the world is as easy a task as the flipping of your hand?

Just as Xia Longyuan was about to respond, his expression suddenly changed.

Far away in the capital, Tang Wanzhuang hurried into the palace to report, “Your Majesty, the northern barbarians have bypassed Yumen Pass[1], and the defending general has surrendered. The barbarians have made it far into the empire. Chang’an has fallen.”

“A rebellion has risen in Jiaozhou. The rebel leader calls himself the Southern Heavenly King and has declared independence.”

“Turmoil has erupted in Jinzhong...”

“Wan Tianxiong of Jianghuai has advanced westward into Nan Commandery!”

Meanwhile, Tngri continued, “Even the Tang Clan harbors disloyalty. The hearts of your officials are divided—some conspire with us, others the Wang Clan, and yet others with Li Shentong in the southwest. There are as many traitors as there are cattle in the fields. Cui Wenjing lies bedridden by the wounds you allowed him to suffer; Cui Yuanyong and his sister bear resentment toward you. Yang Jingxiu only cares about his own clan. Soon, you won’t even be able to hold your own palace together, much less rule the world.”

With these final words, Tngri suddenly laughed, and the last bit of energy he had left exploded violently in Xia Longyuan’s face. “Let me make it even harder for you to reclaim your land!”

Boom!

The detonation of energy from a god at the Profound Control Realm, no matter how diluted, was anything but trivial.

Taking advantage of Xia Longyuan’s momentary distraction, the Sea Emperor fiercely lashed out at his waist.

From the dark mists behind, an aged fist emerged from the crashing waves, striking directly at Xia Longyuan’s back.

Hai Pinglan seized the opportunity to strike. With his attack, the sea erupted in massive waves, the entire ocean churning as if heaven, earth, and man had aligned in perfect harmony.

He, too, was at the Profound Control Realm!

Chapter 577: Furious Sea Raging Waves

Zhao Changhe could feel Xia Chichi tightening her grip on his hand, and instinctively, he squeezed back.

Despite her always speaking of hating her father, of rebellion and revenge, now, at the brink of life and death, she instinctively worried for him. For all the talk of being a witch from a demonic cult, deep down, she was incredibly kind.

From the beginning, her perspective had not been as detached as his. By keeping a certain distance, Zhao Changhe naturally understood that Xia Longyuan’s presence was merely an avatar or a

projection. Even if the projection was destroyed, the worst that would happen was some injury to his actual body, but nothing fatal.

Tngri made that point abundantly clear, calmly detonating his own projection without a hint of concern, knowing that it was not his real life on the line.

But what truly caught Zhao Changhe off guard was Xia Longyuan's reaction.

Zhao Changhe asked himself what he would do if faced with such a three-pronged assault. His first instinct would have been to protect himself by moving away from the core of Tngri's explosion, buying just enough time to try and counter the attacks from the Sea Emperor and Hai Pinglan one by one.

Yet Xia Longyuan's first move was entirely different. He thrust his clawed hand into the heart of the explosion as if grasping something out of the void. "If your goal is making it more difficult for me to reclaim what's mine, then I shall make it so that the god of the northern barbarians slumbers for eternity! My purpose with the Great Xia Empire lies solely in this—to protect it from external forces. The empire can be succeeded by those after me, so what loss is there in that?"

Amidst the explosion, the once-composed soul of Tngri let out a wretched scream, cut off abruptly. The disbelief in that voice was so palpable that Zhao Changhe could almost feel it himself.

He, too, was incredulous. Old Xia's first priority was actually to bear the brunt of the explosion in order to ensure the barbarian god's true body took heavier damage! And he was doing it in defense of his empire!

Who would've thought that he'd actually do something like this?

However, this maneuver had cost Xia Longyuan the chance to evade the other attacks. He staggered briefly, and at that moment, both the Sea Emperor's flood dragon and Hai Pinglan's fist simultaneously reached him.

Xia Longyuan's hand formed into a palm, striking against the flood dragon—yet it was only a cursory defense, using it to gain leverage. In truth, he twisted his body around and directed a heavy punch straight at Hai Pinglan.

Both of his opponents were formidable, and in Xia Longyuan's current state and environment, it was impossible to fend off both attacks simultaneously. He had to focus his efforts, and he chose not to prioritize the Sea Emperor, whom he had originally intended to draw out and beat. Instead, he chose to focus on Hai Pinglan!

Boom!

It was My Fist versus the Furious Sea Ranging Waves Fist. Two emperors who had fought for dominance over the world thirty years ago clashed once more today!

No outsider could fully perceive the terrifying power that erupted between their fists. Zhao Changhe saw Hai Pinglan spit out a mouthful of blood while Xia Longyuan's projection began to fade. He was crushed beneath the weight of the dragon's body, as if his very color was erased, leaving no doubt as to the outcome.

Hai Pinglan reeled backward, blood spurting from his lips, yet he laughed to the heavens, "How exhilarating! To be able to trade full-force blows with Xia Longyuan, just incredible! It feels as if all my frustrations that have accumulated over the years are all gone!"

"I feel the same way! You dared kidnap my daughter? Die!"

"...?" Hai Pinglan's laughter caught in his throat, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

He was not alone; Zhao Changhe and Xia Chichi had the same shocked expression.

Xia Longyuan's second strike, abandoning his original target, was actually to vent his anger on behalf of his daughter!

It was only at that moment that Xia Longyuan finally turned his attention back to the flood dragon, his palm slashing down like a blade. Though it was just a shadowy projection of his hand, it sliced into the flood dragon's tough scales, and a fountain of blood spurted out.

Bam!

The flood dragon thrashed in pain, trying to shake Xia Longyuan off. Xia Longyuan's projection grew more and more blurred, clearly on the verge of fading away. However, his hand remained

lodged in the flood dragon's side. No matter how the Sea Emperor twisted and thrashed, he could not dislodge Xia Longyuan's hand. The hand lodged within the flood dragon's body ceaselessly drained its energy, and Xia Longyuan's intent, though unspoken, was clear: even if he was going down, he would take a big chunk of his enemy with him.

Zhao Changhe's expression shifted as he watched the battle unfold. Xia Longyuan's strength was something he should have anticipated, but to be this powerful felt almost absurd.

The two ancient beings that Xia Longyuan fought were both significantly stronger than Xue Wu and Venerable Duoluo. If the Profound Control Realm was divided into three layers, these two were likely at least at the late second layer or early third layer. Despite neither being at their peak, they were still formidable forces to be reckoned with. And Hai Pinglan, who had also entered the Profound Control Realm, made for a powerful third opponent. Yet, despite being ganged up on by three formidable figures, Xia Longyuan managed to force one to self-destruct and another to cough up blood, and the last was now literally being sliced apart like a pig for slaughter.

Taking on three at once and achieving such a result was beyond monstrous. It was understandable why he looked down upon the chaos of the world. He was simply in a whole different league.

Hai Pinglan steadied himself in mid-air, pausing only for a moment before launching himself forward again.

Even the most ordinary martial artist would know that Xia Longyuan's projection would certainly vanish if Hai Pinglan landed this punch. Of course, it was hard to say what kind of damage Xia Longyuan's true body might suffer as a result of this.

Xia Longyuan, one hand still embedded in the Sea Emperor, met the new assault with another punch, a hint of scorn at the corner of his mouth. "I'll be waiting on the mainland for your return."

He knew full well that he had no energy left. This punch would be his last before fading away.

But just as Xia Longyuan's change of target had taken everyone by surprise, this time, Hai Pinglan's strike surprised Xia Longyuan as well.

Hai Pinglan was the weakest among the combatants, but he was also the least injured, which gave him the advantage at this moment. He deftly dodged Xia Longyuan's punch, and then... his own fist hammered fiercely into the side of the Sea Emperor!

Strangely enough, even Xia Longyuan had not anticipated him to do this. As he showed a brief moment of bewilderment, it was the Sea Emperor who seemed to sense what was coming. Despite the excruciating pain from Xia Longyuan's hand embedded in its side, the massive flood dragon swung its tail violently, meeting Hai Pinglan's punch.

From the time when he ambushed the pirate crew, the Sea Emperor had known that Hai Pinglan harbored thoughts of betrayal. The grudge between them that had festered for over a decade had, at last, reached its breaking point today.

Another wave of tremors shook the sea, scattering raging waves in every direction.

From within the chaotic battle, the Sea Emperor's pained voice emerged, seemingly struggling. "Hai Pinglan, Xia Longyuan still remains. Have you forgotten the reason for your nation's downfall? Even if you wish to kill me, now is hardly the time!"

Hai Pinglan burst into laughter. "I never truly held a grudge for what had happened back then. It was a contest of power, and I lost. Since I wasn't strong enough, what grudge could there possibly be? That punch earlier was just to vent some of my frustrations. If I want payback, I'll do it openly and honorably in the future. But my hatred for my wife's death gnaws at my bones, day and night. I long to strip off your skin and devour your flesh, and I can't wait another moment!"

Xia Longyuan, now reduced to little more than a fading echo, became a mere observer. His shadowy form gradually dissipated amidst the clashing energies, but his laughter still lingered in the air. "Interesting... I'll be waiting for you on the mainland."

While this phrase would have once been said in derision, it now carried a note of true acknowledgment.

Hai Pinglan spat out, "You'd better survive the rising tide of heroes across the world first. I doubt you'll live to see that day! You were never fit to be a ruler. A dog would have been better suited to that throne!"

Xia Longyuan had no chance to retort, vanishing entirely. Before fading away, his gaze swept briefly toward the part of the ocean where the young couple was hiding, his expression impossible to read.

Xia Chichi was visibly stressed out, and she whispered, “How badly is he hurt?”

“I don’t know either,” Zhao Changhe replied softly. “I suspect he’s in some trouble... but there’s nothing we can do right now. Let’s just keep watching for now.”

Xia Chichi fell silent.

Hai Pinglan continued speaking to the Sea Emperor. “Whether the matter with the sacrificial offerings will truly destroy your foundation, I can’t say. For all I know, some pathetic followers might end up even more devoted... But it doesn’t matter. If it weakens you even slightly, then it’s worth it. Eventually, people will wake up and realize that their so-called Sea God is nothing but a self-serving fraud, willing to do anything for personal gain, and that’s enough.”

He then gestured toward the Azure Dragon statue below, miraculously unbroken despite the battle between gods raging above. He smiled. “This statue, once buried beneath the sea because of the collapse of the previous era, was a gateway to a secret realm—something you couldn’t open yourself. So, you intentionally pushed it out of the sea, settling yourself nearby. You wanted to draw in those who could open the gateway, while also creating a spectacle to attract worshippers, convincing them it was your temple. But the truth is, the true sanctuary of your soul and the source of your Sea Tribe aren’t here at all.”

The Sea Emperor’s face visibly darkened.

He clearly had not expected Hai Pinglan to know so much.

Hai Pinglan laughed heartily. “I’ve already commanded Hai Changkong to attack your temple. The Sea Tribe, which you have nurtured for over ten years, shall be wiped off the face of this world in a single sweep!”

Far across the ocean, Hai Changkong, holding a command flag, pointed toward a cluster of rocks ahead. “Fire all cannons!”

BOOM!

Smoke filled the air, stone fragments flying in all directions as countless armored fishmen surged from beneath the reefs, charging furiously toward the warships. As far as the eye could see, they swarmed like a relentless tide.

The soldiers of Penglai drew their blades, and the men of the sea and the fishermen of the Sea Tribe began a brutal battle.

Meanwhile, the Sea Emperor's voice turned calm once more. "With your most trusted forces away, and with yourself now absent from Penglai... Are you certain your kingdom will endure?"

Back on Penglai Island, many officials' faces twisted grotesquely, revealing patches of fish scales.

"I know that many of your Sea Tribe are hidden within Penglai, and many officials are under your control... But what of it?" Hai Pinglan said with a faint smile. "Years ago, when I sought to establish a nation, she opposed it. Today, we're merely returning to her will. If the kingdom must fall, so be it."

"Do you think Hai Changkong would be okay with that?"

"The army is in his hands. If he so wishes, he can easily build a nation for himself—why wait for me?"

"Have you considered that all your plans hinge on one thing... killing me?" The Sea Emperor sneered. "What if you fail?"

"If I fall here, then they'll scatter as pirates once more. The vast Eastern Sea has always had its waves; from the past to the future, it will never belong to one entity alone."

Chapter 578: Black Tortoise's Fist vs. the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm

As their conversation came to an apt end, the two powerhouses at the Profound Control Realm clashed once again.

Although the Sea Emperor was stronger, he was also much more grievously injured, making it so that the two of them were evenly matched. Now, it all came down to who could better exert whatever strength they had.

It could be said that Hai Pinglan's strategy of pitting a tiger against a wolf, making Xia Longyuan and the Sea Emperor fight each other, had perfectly come to the result he desired. Had Xia Longyuan actually killed the Sea Emperor, Hai Pinglan might have been disappointed instead.

Killing the Sea Emperor was something he wanted to do himself; he wanted nothing more than to send his enemy to the Yellow Springs with his own hands.

Zhao Changhe looked on, feeling a certain admiration for Hai Pinglan, the father-in-law he had never met. Even though some of his actions were undeniably questionable, he was a person like any other person, and people... are complex. Overall, Hai Pinglan could certainly be called a hero.

Every figure from the Ranking of Heaven he had come across had failed to disappoint. Even now, with ancient gods and demons rising from their slumber, during a time when the prestige of those on the Ranking of Heaven was not as high as it once was, all of those who were on the ranking proved just how remarkable they still were.

The eras were divided, and no matter how powerful the gods and demons of old had been, they belonged to a different era entirely. In this world, the pinnacle of cultivation was still considered to be the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. The Ranking of Heaven bore the strongest figures of the world in the current era; only those with great capabilities were worthy of great recognition.

The current situation involved many contenders rising to challenge Xia Longyuan, but Zhao Changhe saw it more as the heroes of this age challenging the ancient gods and demons, each for their own reasons.

Behind the scenes, hidden from the eyes of the masses, the struggle between the strongest of this age and the previous age had been ongoing for a long time... Xia Longyuan, Hai Pinglan, Ying Five were prime examples of this, and even Yuxu had been a part of this struggle, though back then, Zhao Changhe had been too weak to fully grasp the situation.

In fact, perhaps Wang Daoning was a part of this struggle as well...

When Hai Pinglan was feigning an alliance with the Sea Emperor, the Sea Emperor's forces should have already moved into Langya, and Penglai and the Wang Clan were probably allies at that point. Now that Hai Pinglan has split from the Sea Emperor, where will Wang Daoning stand?

Would he join Hai Pinglan in opposing the Sea Emperor, or would he fall under the Sea Emperor's control and turn against Penglai?

During the previous battle between the Cui and Wang Clans, both Wang Daoning and Cui Wenjing were badly injured and were forced to retreat to recover. But Wang Daoning's injuries were less severe, so he should have been able to recover faster. I've been out at sea for quite some time now,

so could he have fully recovered already? If he has, then would he choose to attack Puyang, or would he choose to take part in the battle here?

These thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind, though his primary focus remained on observing the battle. He realized he could now clearly follow the details of the exchange between these figures at the top of the world and even withstand the waves of energy coming from them... In other words, both Hai Pinglan and the Sea Emperor were now weakened, no longer able to showcase power at the Profound Control Realm. Their power had been reduced to the general level of those on the Ranking of Heaven, the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

Zhao Changhe's hand rested on his saber's hilt, thinking that, in a fight of this level, he might actually be able to make a difference. At the very least, he would not be blown away by a stray shockwave like before, when all he could do was stand by as a powerless observer.

But his supposed father-in-law did not know who he was, and it was unclear whether Hai Pinglan would appreciate anyone interfering at this point. The worst-case scenario would be him rushing in, only to find himself attacked by both Hai Pinglan and the Sea Emperor.

If that happened, then that would be absolutely miserable. The most ideal person to step in right now would be Lady Three... but where is she? It doesn't make sense for her to not come out now and help finish off the Sea Emperor. Any of her grudges with her father can just be sorted out after...

As he pondered this, a sudden sense of danger struck him.

A streak of sword light shot down from the heavens like lightning. Even before it arrived, the sheer force behind it pressed down like a mountain, making it difficult to even breathe.

Zhao Changhe recognized the move. He had even learned a bit of it himself.

Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Sword!

It was Wang Daoning!

He had just been wondering what role Wang Daoning would play in this situation, and here he was! Unlike Xia Longyuan's projection or the avatar of the barbarian god, Wang Daoning had come here himself!

Whose side is he taking?

For an onlooker, it might have been hard to tell, but for those in the midst of the battle, the killing intent was unmistakable. Hai Pinglan roared in fury, “Wang Daoning! Are you mad? If the Sea Emperor prevails, everyone in Langya will end up as his slaves!”

Wang Daoning’s sword was aimed at Hai Pinglan!

Not only had Wang Daoning decided against attacking Puyang, but he had traveled all the way out to sea to target Penglai!

Wang Daoning remained silent. The Sea Emperor laughed heartily and said, “He’s already provoked Xia Longyuan to the point of no return. Without a new backer, the Wang Clan will be annihilated. If not me, then who else would support him? Clearly, even if you all work together, you wouldn’t have a chance against Xia Longyuan. But once I’ve fully recovered my strength, I will be no weaker than Xia Longyuan!”

Hai Pinglan was consumed by rage. After over a decade of pretending to ally with the Sea Emperor and painstakingly accumulating power, he had finally succeeded in setting up the ultimate showdown, only for it all to come crashing down at this critical moment!

In the blink of an eye, Wang Daoning’s sword was upon him. Hai Pinglan was preparing for a desperate fight when suddenly, a massive wave surged from the sea, and a graceful figure burst forth, launching a punch straight at Wang Daoning’s side.

If Wang Daoning’s sword could suppress the sea, then the force behind this punch seemed powerful enough to tear open a trench on its bottom!

Wang Daoning’s heart tightened, and he dared not carry through with the strike. Instead, he swiftly redirected his sword to his side.

Clang!

The sound of impact echoed as the sea's surface collapsed several li under the force of the blow. Towering waves rose like walls around the point of impact, forming a dome of water like the shell of a mysterious tortoise, encasing everything in its wake.

Wang Daoning's sword was deflected by the barehanded strike, and the sword qi dispersed into the sea, vanishing without a trace.

Hai Pinglan pressed one palm against the flood dragon, then turned in delight and said, "Which hero of the sea has come to my aid? I offer you my deepest thanks!"

Lady Three turned her head, casting a calm gaze at Hai Pinglan.

At some point, she had donned the Black Tortoise's mask. She now exuded an air of majesty, though with an undercurrent of ferocity.

This was the Black Tortoise as seen by the world.

Hai Pinglan's joy froze on his face. In his moment of distraction, the flood dragon's tail whipped at him, and he hastily raised his forearm to block. He was sent flying several li before he finally managed to stop himself.

Zhao Changhe imagined that Hai Pinglan's mind had gone blank during those several li when he had been sent flying. But then his instinct must have kicked in, driving him to madly rush back to hold off the Sea Emperor, preventing the other party from attacking Lady Three.

It was clear that Lady Three donned the mask so as not to reveal her true identity to Hai Pinglan, but it was futile—a deception for herself more than anyone else. The Heavenly Origin Pirates was practically the royal pirate crew of Penglai, and Hai Pinglan had known all along who Venerable Black Tortoise of the Four Idols Cult was, ever since Lady Three sought them out to help fund Four Idols Cult's maritime trade.

On the other hand, Wang Daoning was blissfully unaware of any connection between Lady Three and the masked figure. He now wore an extremely serious expression. "Venerable Black Tortoise?"

Lady Three replied coolly, "I, the Black Tortoise of the Four Idols Cult, have come seeking an exchange with you, Mister Wang."

Wang Daoning spoke slowly, “The Four Idols Cult and my Wang Clan are allies. Our cooperation has been pretty smooth all this time. What is the meaning of your actions today?”

Lady Three sneered, “Aren’t you and Penglai supposed to be allies too? What, then, is the meaning of your actions today?”

Wang Daoning’s face remained expressionless.

Lady Three continued, “Although the Four Idols Cult is a demonic cult, it still has more credibility than certain aristocratic families. When we declare an alliance, we honor it. Acts of betrayal are something that the Four Idols Cult does not take lightly.”

Wang Daoning nearly laughed in disbelief. “Are you joking with me, Venerable Black Tortoise?”

Lady Three slowly removed her mask. “I’m participating in this battle in a personal capacity, just like when Vermillion Bird beat up Wang Daozhong out of personal grievances. This shouldn’t affect the alliance between our two factions, does it?”

In the midst of such a grim battlefield, Wang Daoning could not help but feel an odd mix of irritation and amusement.

Could the world’s perception of the Venerable Black Tortoise somehow be flawed?

Looking at Lady Three with her mask off, even Wang Daoning had to admit there was something uncanny about the Four Idols Cult. It was strange—unlike the Maitreya Cult, they had never used beauty to entice others, yet somehow their venerables and saintesses were all stunningly beautiful.

Are they really a demonic cult or some sort of... gathering of socialites?

“So, what exactly is the meaning of this personal capacity that you speak of?” Wang Daoning could not help but ask. “You’re throwing yourself at me as if I were fighting your father or something!”

Lady Three clenched her fist, then suddenly swung it once more. “That is correct. The person you are fighting is my father!”

In the midst of his fierce battle with the Sea Emperor, Hai Pinglan faltered slightly, but he said nothing.

Wang Daoning could not help but curse inwardly. The sheer absurdity of this revelation left him speechless.

He had wondered why Venerable Black Tortoise had suddenly turned against him. As it turned out, it would have been weird if she hadn't!

Boom!

Wang Daoning's left palm struck out, colliding heavily with Lady Three's fist.

Back then, Xuan Chong had said that the strongest hand art in the world was Xia Longyuan's "My Fist," while the Black Tortoise's Fist and the Wang Clan's Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm were tied for second.

In truth, the ranking had never been tested—the so-called tie was merely to avoid offending anyone.

Now, the question of who truly held the second spot would finally be answered.

But Zhao Changhe was not about to just keep acting as a spectator. He drew Dragon Bird and quietly made his way over, approaching the battleground of the Sea Emperor and Hai Pinglan.

With Wang Daoning's surprise attack, even though Lady Three had intercepted him, Hai Pinglan's attention had still been scattered, putting him at a significant disadvantage against the Sea Emperor.

So what if your side can carry out sneak attacks? So can we. It's only fair to return the favor!

Meanwhile, Xia Chichi drew Iceheart and approached Lady Three and Wang Daoning. Originally, Venerable Black Tortoise had come to sea to help her, but now it seemed that she was the real protagonist... In any case, Xia Chichi figured that she probably did not need to get involved in the battle between Hai Pinglan and the Sea Emperor; that was for her husband to deal with. As for her,

carrying out a sneak attack on Wang Daoning to help a sister from the Four Idols Cult made perfect sense.

If Aunt-Master Black Tortoise is pleased, she might even put in a good word for Changhe and me. Maybe that fierce woman will be more lenient with us in the future...

Chapter 579: The Bloodbath Triggered by a Fake Key

The longer Wang Daoning fought with Lady Three, the more surprised he was.

There had been rumors circulating that both Vermillion Bird and Black Tortoise had already reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, but no one had actually verified these rumors. Most of those on the Ranking of Heaven assumed that even if the two of them had truly reached the third layer, their combat power would be far inferior to those who had been at the level for years. Some of them even believed that even if the two fought together, they would not be able to defeat a more seasoned expert of the third layer.

However, as this fight went on, Wang Daoning realized that Lady Three was far from someone who could be regarded as a newcomer of the third layer. The foundation of her cultivation was much more solid than he had anticipated, and her combat awareness was far beyond what one would expect from a newcomer.

Her overwhelming, relentless punches were enough to make Wang Daoning feel rather overwhelmed. His sword was practically useless against her powerful fists. She had already reached a level where it made no difference whether her opponent wielded a weapon or not. In fact, Wang Daoning felt as though it would be better to engage her with his bare hands; he felt that he would be able to exert more force using his palms.

This woman might be slightly weaker than Cui Wenjing, but the difference is almost negligible.

Lady Three had indeed been rather inexperienced when it came to fighting those at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. In fact, aside from sparring with Vermillion Bird, her first battle—first real battle—at this level was against the water construct. She thus made numerous mistakes, leading to the crystal core of the construct managing to slip away and herself getting injured badly in the fight against the giant octopus. This unfortunate series of events eventually led to her being, well, taken by a certain brute. In any case, it was simply because her control over her newfound power had yet to be refined.

Truly, it was a heart-wrenching story, perfectly illustrating how a woman in the jianghu who was not strong enough would inevitably be taken advantage of. The only question was whether the one who took advantage was a scoundrel or the protagonist.

But after these battles and losses, she had well and truly learned her lessons, and as a young genius who had already reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, she did not need years of further refinement. She was already more than capable.

As for her cultivation foundation, no one could really say why Zhao Changhe's Pure Bliss Art was so effective in consolidating her cultivation. Lady Three cautiously suspected it may also have something to do with the Rejuvenation Art. Regardless, dual cultivation with him felt like taking powerful medicinal pills—it was invigorating in every possible sense.

She had initially expected there to be a noticeable gap between her and Wang Daoning. After all, Wang Daoning was said to be ranked tenth on the Ranking of Heaven, but he was not just any cultivator at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. He had already made some progress in the third layer, and he was likely at least at around the middle of the stage. Yet now, in battle, while there might be a slight gap, it was truly minor. It was a gap that could be overcome with tactics and the right strategies.

And those, she had!

After countless exchanges, Wang Daoning was almost convinced that Lady Three's combat style was as straightforward as it was, further believing the conclusion he had arrived at based on what he had heard about the Black Tortoise. But just then, a snake-like whip managed to silently sneak its way behind him, coiling menacingly around his ankle with sinister precision.

Wang Daoning had already sheathed his sword, only for his opponent to suddenly bring out a weapon—a flexible whip, utterly contrasting the fierce punches and strikes they had been exchanging earlier. The drastic shift threw Wang Daoning off for a split second, and as he quickly drew his sword again to counter, the whip vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

One moment it was in front of him, and the next, it was behind him. It was almost as though there was another person controlling it.

Wang Daoning's heart tensed slightly. Rumor had it that the Black Tortoise embodied the fusion of a tortoise and a snake, embodying the attributes of both. Judging by her fighting style, there was a strong possibility that she was pursuing a cultivation path involving a divided soul—a highly dangerous path that could potentially drive her mad.

Yet, regardless of what her future cultivation held, she was proving incredibly difficult to fight even now.

With his years of experience to guide him, Wang Daoning decided to take a risk. He deliberately left an opening, thrusting his sword toward the center of the whip's ripples. As expected, the whip coiled around his sword, binding it. Lady Three then seized the opportunity to launch a punch directly at his chest.

This, however, was precisely what Wang Daoning wanted. Having already sheathed his sword, he had no use for it. By sacrificing his sword, he could neutralize the annoying whip. With his free hand, he unleashed a palm strike aimed straight at Lady Three's fist.

As fist and palm collided once more, a massive Black Tortoise manifested behind Lady Three. At the same time, the constellation of the Black Tortoise in the sky, previously concealed by heavy clouds, suddenly shone brightly, piercing through the clouds and illuminating the sea. Behind Wang Daoning, a manifestation of his own appeared—a boundless sky and a tranquil sea, blending seamlessly into the surroundings, almost unnoticeable unless one paid close attention.

The battle had reached its peak, with both combatants unleashing their full power.

But a smile tugged at the corner of Lady Three's lips.

Does he really think that neutralizing my whip with his sword is clever? That's exactly what I want.

While Wang Daoning's left hand was occupied by his bound sword and his right was locked against her palm, a chilling sword of ice shot up from below the ocean's surface, aimed directly at his back!

Xia Chichi, who had been waiting for an opportunity, suddenly struck!

In the sky, the Azure Dragon and White Tiger constellations shone in tandem, resonating with the Black Tortoise constellation above, forming a synergy among the four idols. It was as if the two of them had somehow activated some kind of battle formation.

Wang Daoning felt the strength of the Black Tortoise's Fist increase by at least ten percent, and the fierce, razor-sharp presence of the White Tiger from behind was unnervingly powerful. The White Tiger saintess was clearly using a divine sword—something no mere flesh could withstand!

And at this moment, both of his hands were occupied!

Where the fuck did the White Tiger saintess come from?

Wang Daoning stomped his foot, sending a column of water surging from the sea, rushing toward Xia Chichi behind him. At the same time, he twisted his body, narrowly avoiding the edge of the incoming sword.

Xia Chichi's eyes remained unwavering as the water column slammed into her. Her divine sword did not falter, slicing forward without hesitation, leaving a gash across Wang Daoning's left shoulder.

The ferocity of the Black Tortoise's Fist surged, and Wang Daoning could no longer hold on. He spat out a mouthful of blood and abandoned the sword entangled in the whip, retreating at full speed.

So this is the current generation of the Four Idols Cult? Wang Daoning thought as he fled. Such precise timing, such fearlessness in the face of death... How will the next generation of the Wang Clan ever match up to enemies like this?

No... Will the Wang Clan even have a next generation?

Xia Chichi also spat out a mouthful of blood, tumbling into the sea with a loud splash. The water column she had endured was far from just a splash to the face—it was akin to taking a blow from Wang Daoning himself, and it was a strike that she could hardly withstand at her level.

Yet before she could fall into the water, she found herself enveloped in a warm embrace, an embrace soft and comforting.

Xia Chichi could not resist snuggling a little closer, and when she looked up, she saw the "benevolent" face of Lady Three. Blood was trickling from the corner of her aunt-master's mouth, evidence of the backlash from the power she had unleashed just moments earlier.

Wang Daoning had been renowned for a long time now, and he was truly no easy opponent.

Xia Chichi asked, "Aunt-Master, why aren't you chasing after him?"

"My mission is to protect you, little... saintess. Wang Daoning's fate is already sealed; he'll be captured sooner or later," Lady Three said, maintaining her composure as a senior. She was about to offer some words of concern for Xia Chichi's injuries when a deafening explosion resounded from the ongoing battle between Hai Pinglan and the Sea Emperor. The shockwave pushed both of them back several zhang.

They turned to see Zhao Changhe darting beneath the flood dragon, appearing like nothing more than a small mouse compared to the massive creature.

Yet, Dragon Bird's edge sliced through the flood dragon's soft underbelly, and with one swift motion, Zhao Changhe tore it open.

Lady Three and Xia Chichi were stunned. They were unable to comprehend how he had managed to achieve such a feat. That was the Sea Emperor, not a random shrimp you could just gut!

The Sea Emperor thrashed in agony, his massive claw swiping at Zhao Changhe. Zhao Changhe barely managed to raise his saber to shield his face before being struck and sent flying far into the sky.

But at the same moment, Hai Pinglan's fist came smashing down on the flood dragon's forehead.

The flood dragon let out a heart-wrenching wail, shaking Hai Pinglan off violently before diving toward the statue below.

The Azure Dragon Seal suddenly appeared, pressed firmly against the statue.

Hai Pinglan spat out a mouthful of blood, unable to catch his breath, and rushed forward. "No! He's trying to escape into the secret realm! Stop him!"

Lady Three and Xia Chichi ignored him.

The Azure Dragon Seal pressed against the statue, but nothing happened—there was not even a flicker of light.

The flood dragon turned back in rage, fixing his gaze on Xia Chichi. “You dare deceive me?”

Xia Chichi grinned. “Aren’t you supposed to be the mighty Sea Emperor? I can’t believe you actually fell for it. Did you really think that I threw out the real key just so you can take it?”

The Sea Emperor was utterly baffled. Earlier, he had clearly sensed a reaction between Xia Chichi and the statue, which indicated that the seal had unlocked something. The Azure Dragon Seal and the statue shared an unmistakable connection, proving that it should be the key.

The Sea Emperor made his move, Xia Longyuan intervened, Tngri descended, Hai Pinglan fought his decisive battle, and Wang Daoning launched his betrayal. The resulting upheaval and turmoil in the world to come were beyond anyone’s ability to foresee. Yet, now it turned out that the source of it all was nothing more than a fake key that could not open a single door?

Hai Pinglan, overcome with delight, roared as he threw a powerful punch downward, shouting, “Die!”

At the same time, Zhao Changhe shot back into the fray from afar, Dragon Bird slicing through the air with furious intensity.

Lady Three picked up Wang Daoning’s abandoned sword, while Xia Chichi raised Iceheart. Together, they attacked, aiming for the wound on the Sea Emperor’s exposed belly.

Little did anyone know, this scene could very well be called... a family hunting the Sea Emperor together.

Chapter 580: But the Key is Real

Lady Three and Xia Chichi had no idea how Zhao Changhe managed to turn the tide of the battle.

In order to understand what had happened, a short rewind is called for.

Zhao Changhe's attempt to ambush the Sea Emperor actually happened before Xia Chichi's attack on Wang Daoning, but his results were far less stellar.

While Wang Daoning and Lady Three were in a stalemate, Hai Pinglan was already struggling against the Sea Emperor, so Zhao Changhe did not have the luxury of waiting for the perfect moment like Xia Chichi. He had to act immediately to provide support.

The body of the flood dragon, which the Sea Emperor had taken over, was extremely long. It was previously coiled up to form an island, and now, fully stretched out, it spanned several li. While Hai Pinglan fought desperately in the front, Zhao Changhe swung his saber fiercely at the flood dragon's tail, trying to see if such a massive creature could really defend all parts of itself at once.

In response, the flood dragon's tail whipped back like a flyswatter, effortlessly swatting him away.

Zhao Changhe broke into a cold sweat, having only narrowly escaped the tail whip.

It seemed the Sea Emperor had no issue keeping watch across both ends of his body, and the sheer power of the flood dragon's movements far exceeded Zhao Changhe's expectations from when he had watched the battle from afar.

A fight always seems much easier when you're a spectator.

Hai Pinglan holding his ground or Xia Longyuan slicing through the flood dragon's flesh as if it were tofu seemed simple enough, but when faced with the flood dragon himself, Zhao Changhe finally understood the enormity and might of this foe. The sheer magnitude of the other party's body made every sweep a massive, unstoppable force.

Even a slight graze from the flood dragon would mean an end no different from a fly getting crushed by the barrel of a cannon; should he get hit, he would be reduced to nothing but a smear of blood.

He had assumed that something this massive would naturally move much slower, especially since the Sea Emperor was wounded. Yet while it was true that the flood dragon's movements were slower, the difference in scale meant that even a slight adjustment of the flood dragon's tail, even the tiniest shift in stance, translated to sweeping across dozens of zhang.

In effect, it was faster.

Zhao Changhe once again realized something clearly: Bigger really is better.

But although Zhao Changhe's initial strike failed miserably, the Sea Emperor was quite surprised.

Less than a month ago, the Sea Emperor had briefly crossed paths with Zhao Changhe through the body of the giant octopus. Back then, although he could not properly confront Zhao Changhe due to the threat of Xia Longyuan, he still employed some spiritual attacks, which Zhao Changhe cleverly resisted. This alone elevated Zhao Changhe in the Sea Emperor's eyes in terms of combat intuition. But even so, the Sea Emperor had not expected such rapid improvements in less than a month.

If Zhao Changhe were of the same strength now as he had been back then, the saber strike he had just attempted would have failed to even leave a scratch on the flood dragon's scales. But this time, even before the saber landed, a sense of danger surged in the Sea Emperor's mind. He knew that if the blow connected, he would be wounded.

With how quickly this young man improves, the pressure that he places on his peers in the Central Plains must be immense.

Since Zhao Changhe's saber could hurt him, the Sea Emperor had to divert some of his attention to deal with him. Hai Pinglan, who had previously lost the initiative and was on the back foot, finally got a moment to breathe. Now, taking Hai Pinglan down first was no longer a feasible option for the Sea Emperor. In other words, the fight had reached yet another deadlock.

Both Hai Pinglan and the Sea Emperor were heavily wounded, and the outcome of the deadlock was no longer something to be decided by strength—it was a question of who would burn out first. The Sea Emperor was thus able to remain calm. There was no point in comparing the endurance of a human body to that of a flood dragon.

Human bodies are much more fragile...

Zhao Changhe continued to carefully harass from the Sea Emperor's side while pondering this very question. Hai Pinglan was the main force, and he was merely there to disrupt the flow. But given Hai Pinglan's age, how could he hope to outlast a flood dragon? Once Hai Pinglan could not hold on any longer, it would be over for all of them.

Leaving aside Xia Longyuan and his overpowered abilities, is a human body truly inferior to a flood dragon's at the same level? In terms of both strength and stamina?

If that's the case, then why is it humans rather than flood dragons who emerged from the ruins of the previous era, taking over the world? It seems that even in the previous era, the rulers were humans.

There has to be something about the human body that surpasses a flood dragon's—what is it?

Zhao Changhe's eyes scanned the massive length of the flood dragon's body and thought to himself that its weaknesses were actually quite obvious. The Sea Emperor had fought using the flood dragon's body for so long, yet he really only had three moves.

The first was biting. This had failed to do any significant damage to Xia Longyuan's fists—instead, he received a hit straight to the throat.

The second was sweeping. The sheer size and force of his body were powerful and swift—enough to make Xia Longyuan's form blur after being struck. But ultimately, it was a simple attack, making it predictable and easy to dodge.

The third was energy blasts. These blasts were sometimes water, sometimes fire. This move was versatile, and it was the primary move that the Sea Emperor was using against Hai Pinglan, essentially turning the flood dragon into a caster.

And that was it—just these three moves. The flood dragon's stubby claws were practically useless for offense, as they could not even reach forward. They were only helpful when Hai Pinglan tried to attack from below, during which they provided some defense.

This clearly illustrated the flood dragon's fatal flaw. Unlike a human, who could use all parts of their body for multidirectional offense and defense, the flood dragon's attacks were overly simple, and its defenses had unavoidable blind spots. For example, when Xia Longyuan had cut at its back earlier, its claws could not reach upward to block the attack. If it could not evade in time, it had no choice but to take the hit—and once struck, not even thrashing could dislodge the blade!

Of course, in a head-on confrontation, not just anyone could get to its back. Hai Pinglan had tried countless times and failed to gain the position. Zhao Changhe attempted to leap onto the flood dragon from its midsection, but the flood dragon twisted its body, its tail whipping wildly, and he could not get close.

The disparity in strength was evident—not everyone was Xia Longyuan.

Zhao Changhe's gaze shifted to the flood dragon's underbelly.

Compared to the back, the underbelly was much softer. However, the flood dragon's claws could protect it, and taking a swipe from one of those claws could mean death.

Zhao Changhe gritted his teeth and suddenly dove beneath the flood dragon, slipping into a spot that looked like it might be out of reach of the claws. With his left hand, he thrust the sword in his left hand upward.

The Sea Emperor could not help but laugh. "How impulsive. As expected from the young."

Zhao Changhe seemed to be at a blind spot beyond the reach of the flood dragon's claws, but with a simple twist of its body, its claws could easily reach him...

Just as Zhao Changhe's sword moved, the claw was already upon him. Even though Dragon Emperor was a divine sword, there was no way it could harm a real flood dragon's claw. This strike would crush both Zhao Changhe and his sword into dust.

However, to the Sea Emperor's surprise, just as his claw was about to make contact, the sword suddenly vanished. Zhao Changhe let out a fierce roar, his eyes instantly turning blood-red, and he used his bare fist to forcefully meet the claw!

His arm muscles swelled to nearly twice their normal size. The power of his punch no longer burst outward but condensed inward, as if reversing the tidal wave he had unleashed earlier—transforming into an oceanic abyss.

With the Black Tortoise's Fist as the base, he built upon it with the intent of the Wind and Lightning Palm of the Divine Brilliance Sect—shifting the focus of his power from offense to defense in hopes of being able to withstand the flood dragon's crushing blow!

Just as Wang Daoning had abandoned his sword to block Lady Three with his palm, there were times when bare fists and palms offered greater leverage than any blade.

In Hai Pinglan's eyes, from his front-facing vantage, the young man at this moment was not inferior to a true god or demon.

He was holding back a dragon, as if propping up the heavens!

Crack!

With a sickening crunch, the bones in Zhao Changhe's arm shattered, his muscles tore, and half his body was instantly drenched in blood. Yet, he had ultimately managed to block the claw for a moment!

And that one moment was enough to change the course of the battle!

With a fierce roar, his right hand swung Dragon Bird upward, the saber tearing through the flood dragon's soft underbelly, slicing all the way to its other claw.

The flood dragon let out an earth-shaking wail, sending another claw crashing down with immense force. Zhao Changhe raised his saber to block, but was still sent flying several li, his blood trailing across the sky.

Just at that moment, with Wang Daoning retreating heavily wounded, the tide of the battle suddenly turned. The Sea Emperor knew that if Lady Three rejoined the assault, he would not be able to fight any longer. Immediately, he surged toward the statue, attempting to escape to the secret realm.

But there was no escape—the key was fake, and the door failed to open.

The “family” closed in on him, with their myriad techniques raining down on every wound along the flood dragon's body, heedless of their own lives.

Though only Lady Three was truly capable of delivering a fatal blow at this point, right now, she alone was more than enough to seal the Sea Emperor's fate.

The Sea Emperor tried to break out of their encirclement, but he simply could not do so.

His first instinct was to head toward the weakest link—Xia Chichi, who was also heavily injured. But that choice was like stirring up a hornet's nest. Zhao Changhe, half-crippled as he was, immediately moved to shield Xia Chichi, while Lady Three's punch smashed half of the flood dragon's face into a pulp.

If he had chosen to break out of the encirclement by attacking Hai Pinglan, he might not have faced such a severe reaction.

The mighty Sea Emperor, once ruler of the seas in the previous era, was now cornered, with no way up or down, about to be beaten to death by a handful of mere mortals, unable to even escape.

In its eyes, a wild, murderous rage flared. In utter despair, he prepared to self-destruct.

Hai Pinglan suddenly shouted, "He's going to detonate the flood dragon's body! Get as far away as you can!"

The Sea Emperor was only occupying the flood dragon's body. Even if he detonated it, he could still retreat to his true temple—the one currently under attack by Hai Changkong. However, his merging with the flood dragon's body was so advanced that such an explosion would inflict severe damage on his soul. Decades of recovery efforts would be completely wasted, leaving him even weaker than when he had first awakened.

Unless pushed to the brink, he would never choose such a path.

"You want to run?" He chuckled darkly. "The detonation of this body will lay waste to everything within a hundred li. How far do you think you can run with your speed?"

As he spoke, his body began to swell. "I can return, but you will all die here... To stand against a god as mere mortals—was it worth it? Hah—"

His laughter had barely started when it was abruptly cut off.

Xia Chichi darted over to the statue, pulled the embedded Azure Dragon Seal from it, and shifted it to a different position.

The previously unresponsive statue suddenly lit up with brilliance.

Everyone there, quick-witted as they were, immediately rushed over, gathering around Xia Chichi.

“NOO!!!” yelled the Sea Emperor, but his detonation of the flood dragon had begun—there was no stopping it now.

And in this final moment, the Sea Emperor muttered the only word that came to mind.

“Fuck.”

Boom!

The flood dragon exploded violently, annihilating everything within a hundred li. Even the sea itself seemed to vanish, leaving behind a deep, empty trench on the now-visible bottom.

Unfortunately for him, by the time that happened, the glowing statue had already teleported Xia Chichi and her companions to safety.