

T. Times 671

Chapter 671: Strategic Preparations

When Zhao Changhe met up with Xue Canghai, the scene was steeped in the aura of the jianghu.

Snow was falling heavily, blanketing the city walls as the setting sun cast its crimson light, bathing the battlements in hues of blood. Xue Canghai sat cross-legged atop the wall, rhythmically sharpening his saber.

The saber, as red as blood, reflected the dying light of the sun, its color a perfect match.

The northern wind howled, carrying the steady rhythm of the saber being honed. Its sound echoed across half the city, resonating among the thousands of troops stationed there.

Zhao Changhe stood silently behind him, watching without interrupting. Xue Canghai paid no mind to the arrival of the so-called saint of the Blood God Cult, continuing to hone his saber as if no one were there.

Zhao Changhe found himself oddly captivated by the scene. If it had been someone else, it might have been perfect. But with it being Xue Canghai, there was always the potential for some comments to ruin the atmosphere...

Still, it seemed like Old Xue had redeemed himself. In Puyang, he was now a respected figure among the soldiers and civilians, and across the jianghu, his name on the Rankings of Troubled Times had become synonymous with a true expert. If anyone had earned the right to be ostentatious, it was him.

Shiing!

With a final stroke, Xue Canghai slid his finger along the edge of the blade, his eyes glinting with vicious blood qi. The saber trembled in resonance, sending a pulse of blood qi spiraling into the sky. In an instant, the sun dipped below the horizon, plunging the world into darkness.

It was as if his blade had cleaved the setting sun itself.

Zhao Changhe could not help but suspect that Xue Canghai's imagined opponent for that strike was Yue Hongling...

Similar to Cui Yuanyong, Xue Canghai no longer measured himself against Zhao Changhe. The gap between them had grown too vast to inspire rivalry; only reverence remained. Yet both men still harbored an enduring fixation on Yue Hongling, the indomitable figure who had once stood as their unattainable benchmark.

Zhao Changhe, too, missed Yue Hongling. It had been so long since he had heard any news of her. Amidst this great upheaval, he wondered where she had wandered off to. Still, Zhao Changhe was far less worried for her than he used to be. She had proven time and again that she did not need to worry about her. If anything, it was better and wiser for him to just focus on his own matters.

At last, Xue Canghai kept his saber and turned, bowing deeply to Zhao Changhe. "Saint."

Similar to Cui Yuanyong, Xue Canghai found Zhao Changhe to be a peculiar figure. Despite his towering status, Zhao Changhe carried himself without the slightest pretense, standing silently behind him and allowing him to show off. Of course, he had not really been trying to show off—every martial artist who wielded a blade entered a state of contemplation while honing their blade. Zhao Changhe understood this very well himself.

The more Zhao Changhe acted this way, the more Xue Canghai respected him.

It was no mistake to follow a man like him.

Truthfully, the Blood God Cult was Zhao Changhe's most direct and loyal force. Just yesterday, Instructor Sun had been seated prominently at Zhao Changhe's wedding banquet. Instructor Sun's rise to grand elder had required no justification; he practically earned his position while lying down. He was the epitome of a winner in life.

Zhao Changhe said, "The Blood God Saber has seen countless battles. It should have accumulated some minor nicks and wear, right?"

"Of course," Xue Canghai admitted with a sigh. "After so many years, any other blade would have long since been rendered useless. The Blood God Saber isn't one of those treasured weapons imbued with a spirit, but the fact that it's lasted this long is already a testament to its quality."

Zhao Changhe remarked, “Lie was strange that way, wasn’t he? A saber user who cares so much about arrays rather than forging. I’ll help you reforge your saber sometime... Damn it, I swear, before I learned to forge, none of this ever came up. The moment I learned, suddenly it’s like there’s work to do at every turn.”

Xue Canghai chuckled. “That’s the thing, isn’t it? People who know how to cook end up doing it all the time at home. Don’t want to be the permanent cook? Then don’t learn.”

Zhao Changhe burst out laughing. “Words of wisdom right there!”

Xue Canghai grinned. “Speaking of arrays, the array plate is more complete now.”

Zhao Changhe nodded. He had repaired the core of the array plate earlier, but tracking down the various bits that had to be inlaid was a slow process—something he obviously did not have time for. Fortunately, the Blood God Cult had found a powerful ally in the Cui Clan. Over the past few months, even amidst the chaos of war, the Cui Clan had discreetly dispatched agents to scour the jianghu

for the missing components of the Blood God Array Plate. With their vast resources and connections, they had made rapid progress. Frankly, it would not be surprising if the array plate was close to being fully restored.

Based on the usual patterns of how these ancient artifacts operated, the pieces would not have scattered into different secret realms. They were likely spread across the main divine land, making them easy enough to locate—unless a piece had ended up in the ocean depths, in which case it was as good as gone. On land, however, these beads were imbued with such dense vicious qi that their presence would inevitably stir strange phenomena, drawing the attention of martial artists and collectors alike.

“How many are still missing?”

“Only the last bead, and we already have a lead of where it might be.”

“Where is it?”

“Most likely in the Tngri Temple.” Xue Canghai grinned. “Seems like we’re quite lucky.”

It was somewhat true—at the very least, the bead had not sunk into the sea. As long as its location was known, the rest was just a matter of logistics. While the Tngri Temple might be one of the most formidable strongholds of this era, it was also an inevitable battleground for Zhao Changhe. Sooner or later, there would be a life-and-death clash. In the meantime, the Blood God Cult's anticipation was palpable.

Even incomplete, the array plate had already demonstrated its power as a sacred artifact. Zhao Changhe had used it to repel Wang Daoning and save Cui Wenjing. Xue Canghai had used it to defeat Wang Daozhong, transforming his reputation overnight.

The potential aid that the sacred artifact could provide once completed was undoubtedly massive. It was, after all, connected to cultivation insights and heritage. The more complete the array plate was, the clearer the insights they were able to receive on aspects of their cultivation. It was with the help of the array plate that Old Xue's recent progress came to surpass the sum of several years of efforts. It was largely to do with the array plate that the entire Blood God Cult could grow stronger and solidify their position.

If the sacred artifact could be fully restored, Zhao Changhe and Xue Canghai would become the most glorious and illustrious pair of saint and cult leader in the history of the Blood God Cult. As long as the cult endured, they would be revered by its followers for generations.

Ironically, Zhao Changhe now found himself less

invested in Lie's legacy. While the later stages of the Vicious Blood Saber Art were undoubtedly powerful, he had reached a stage where inheriting the paths of others was no longer the best way forward. He needed to forge his own path. Lie's lineage would serve Xue Canghai well, but it was no longer for him.

Zhao Changhe said, "The Tngri Temple isn't a place we can just barge into whenever we want. Right now, our priority is unification."

Xue Canghai gripped the hilt of his saber, his grin turning wolfish. "No need to be so wordy. Just tell me who to attack."

"The Wang Clan, of course."

"When?"

“Rest for tonight. We leave at dawn.”

“We could pull off a night raid, you know. No one would expect an attack during a night of heavy snow. At least the first city to the east wouldn’t stand a chance. Of course, this would only work as an opening to the campaign. The rest would have to wait until spring. This ice and snow aren’t exactly ideal for a full campaign...”

“No need for a night raid. We want a grand show, one that will be etched into everyone’s minds,” Zhao Changhe said, gazing northward. His voice dropped. “This battle isn’t about taking cities—it’s about sending a message. You think I’d have our brothers storming a city in these conditions? Even I know that’s not how wars are fought.”

* * *

At the capital.

As Zhao Changhe began his march south to Puyang, the capital buzzed with its own preparations for war. Having just returned from the campaign in the north, Huangfu Shaozong now stood on the snowy training grounds outside the city, addressing his troops, “Brothers! The Wang Clan has been rebelling for nearly half a year now! Before, we were stuck defending the Cui Clan. But now, with Wang Daoning dead, the time to strike is here! Don’t let the cold hold you back. We’re going to Langya for the New Year!”

His words boomed across the field, but the response from his soldiers was tepid at best.

Damn it, in the middle of winter, can’t you see the heavy snow?

Is this really the time to go on a campaign? Come on!

Still, Huangfu Shaozong’s grip on his troops was firm. Despite their mutinous expressions, they marched. Grumbling and muttering, they moved out. At least for now, there were no signs of open defiance.

In the distance, Lu Jianzhang and several others stood watching the departing army, their expressions thoughtful as they stroked their beards. When their gazes met, a shared thought flickered between them.

“A young empress, a general who’s spent his whole life playing around in the capital, and a venerable of a demonic cult skilled only in sacrifices and assassinations in the jianghu... What a band of misfits running this empire. Who would have thought that the most reliable person in this new dynasty would be a former bandit from Beimang? Sure, his one-man conquest of Qinghe was impressive, but...”

“Impressive? It wasn’t a one-man conquest but a single whip.”

“Don’t underestimate Cui Wenjing. King Zhao’s whip may have tamed Cui Yuanyang, but the same could not be said for Cui Wenjing. King Zhao clearly has his own means. And perhaps that’s why the empress has come to be overconfident? Thinking that joining forces with the Cui Clan would make Langya easy pickings? Setting aside the ill-timed campaign, emptying the city’s defenses is quite foolish. If the initial battle goes poorly, there may be mutiny.”

“Did First Seat Tang not advise against it?”

“This whole campaign seems so sudden. None of us knew beforehand. First Seat Tang probably didn’t either. But I’d wager she’s storming into court right now to give them a piece of her mind.”

“Hah... Then we should head there as well. It’s time for court. Watching First Seat Tang and the young empress argue—it’s becoming quite the spectacle of this new dynasty.”

The group chuckled as they made their way off, their steps deliberate and unhurried.

Despite claiming to head for court, most of the officials stopped by their homes first—presumably to change into more formal attire. Not long after, figures from various households slipped away quietly, vanishing into the snowy night.

Chapter 672: A Single Arrow Shocks the World

The following day, Cui Yuanyong and Xue Canghai each led their troops eastward, swiftly reaching the riverbank.

Xue Canghai’s suggestion of a night raid to seize a city from the day before now seemed laughable. It became evident why he was so often challenged by those of lower rank. He had lingered in the area so long, yet he failed to understand the lay of the land on the far side of the river.

The reason Puyang stood as a formidable barrier to the Wang Clan's westward advance was the wide river separating the two territories. This river was none other than the Yellow River.

It was not some minor tributary but the main branch of the Yellow River. The river bent like a hook and curved northeast toward the Eastern Sea. Its course did not always divide regions into north and south; some regions were divided into east and west, as was the case with Puyang and Juancheng on the opposite shore.

In the days of the Great Xia Empire, both sides belonged to the same state, and no one thought to station heavy defenses along the riverbanks. When the first rebels rose in defiance, they crossed the river unopposed and swiftly laid siege to Puyang. Once the fighting abated, both sides fortified the river with water strongholds and defensive setups. Now, neither side could cross without a significant struggle.

The winter was harsh, but the winds were not, and since the river had not frozen over, it was quite navigable.

Standing on the riverbank, Zhao Changhe gazed across to the opposite shore. He could faintly make out a dense network of water strongholds and ships, their flags waving in the wind.

The movement on their side had not gone unnoticed. Across the river, the enemy's boats were being repositioned, their activity resembling a swarm of ants in organized chaos.

Zhao Changhe glanced at Xue Canghai, the self-proclaimed expert of night raids. Xue Canghai's face was flushed red with embarrassment as he turned to berate his subordinates. "Your armor's all crooked! Fix it! You're embarrassing me!"

The subordinates: "?"

As for the upcoming river crossing, neither Cui Yuanyong nor Xue Canghai had a clear strategy. They both turned to Zhao Changhe, their expressions heavy with expectation. They wondered how he planned to create an overwhelming spectacle.

Surely, he doesn't intend to sacrifice lives recklessly to put on a show?

Zhao Changhe broke the silence, turning to Cui Yuanyong with a question: “Who is the enemy commander? It should be one of the Wang Clan’s more prominent generals, right?”

“It’s Cao Boping, ranked nineteenth on the Ranking of Man. He was previously a military officer in charge of the security of the imperial palace. He’s a seasoned veteran who knows his way around a battlefield.”

Zhao Changhe nodded thoughtfully. People could comment whatever they wanted about the former Xia court, but nobody could deny that it had produced many figures of note on the Ranking of Man. From Lu Shiheng of Xiangyang and Di Muzhi of Bashu to this Cao Boping, as well as Zhang Ximeng—whom Cui Yuanyong had recently replaced—these individuals often remained unknown in the jianghu but were prominent within the imperial structure.

In truth, the imperial court’s strength far surpassed that of most sects in the jianghu. With the experts from the Demon Suppression Bureau and the aristocratic families, the imperial ranks held a formidable pool of talent. However, scattered across various roles and cloaked in anonymity, they often seemed less intimidating than they truly were. They simply lacked fame and were scattered, making it seem like there were not many of them.

“Someone on the Ranking of Man should do.” Zhao Changhe said no more. Suddenly, he drew a deep breath and shouted loudly, “General Cao, are you there?”

His voice clearly carried across the Yellow River, reaching the ears of every soldier on the opposite shore. It was as if the words were spoken right next to each person’s ear.

Both sides were stunned. The depths of this Asura King’s strength were truly unfathomable. Rumors claimed he had defeated an ancient demon god at the Cui Clan, earning their allegiance. Many dismissed it as the Cui Clan trying to save face, but after this display, it seemed that it might have actually been true.

Cao Boping raised his hand, signaling his officers to calm their panic. He said evenly, “The claims of him defeating a demon god are not credible. Zhao Changhe is only second on the Ranking of Earth. At best, he could generously be placed at the bottom of the Ranking of Heaven, akin to Cui Wenjing in his early years. In a battle between two armies, amidst the chaos of thousands, one expert alone cannot decide the outcome—especially in a river crossing battle. He cannot fly. What are you all panicking for?”

The general’s composure somewhat reassured his officers. Truthfully, if this were a land battle, many would feel apprehensive. A powerhouse like Zhao Changhe could act as the spearhead and

easily turn the tide. But the Yellow River was between them, and that alone brought a considerable measure of confidence.

Cao Boping walked to the front of the camp to respond. Lacking full confidence in his own voice, he moved closer, stepping onto the prow of a ship before shouting back, “What do you have to say to me, King Zhao?”

Even having moved closer, the howling river winds carried his words away, leaving them almost inaudible to the opposite shore. Only a handful of powerful individuals barely caught his message.

Zhao Changhe turned to Cui Yuanyong. “Is this the idiot we’re dealing with?”

Cui Yuanyong, delighted by the insult as if savoring fine wine, nodded. “Yes, that’s him. Wait—what are you doing?”

Everyone watched in astonishment as Zhao Changhe took out a gleaming golden bow and fitted a radiant golden arrow. He aimed it toward the opposite shore, leaving his men dumbfounded.

What is he thinking?

There’s such a massive distance between the two sides of the river. Even if King Zhao has the strength to shoot an arrow, what bow could withstand that strength? And at such range, with the target barely visible and the north wind howling, how could he possibly aim? Is this a joke?

On the opposite shore, Cao Boping also noticed Zhao Changhe drawing his bow and laughed incredulously. “If King Zhao wishes to vent his frustration, perhaps he should shoot at the bird between his legs. At least then, you might hit something.”

The soldiers around him erupted into laughter, their mirth echoing across the river and mortifying the Cui Clan troops, who covered their faces in embarrassment.

Cao Boping himself threw his head back in wild laughter, certain this mockery would boost morale.

Twang!

Then came the twang of a bowstring.

By the time they heard it, a stream of golden light had already pierced through Cao Boping's open mouth. The arrow continued with unstoppable momentum, tearing through several soldiers behind him before crashing into the ship's cabin with a deafening explosion.

A stunned silence fell over both banks. Only the howling of the north wind remained, sweeping across the river.

Thud!

Cao Boping toppled backward, his lifeless body hitting the deck. A burst of blood sprayed from his mouth like a fountain, sparkling in the frigid air.

Above, the sky shimmered briefly with a flash of golden light.

Eleventh month, Slight Cold[1]. Wan Dongliu deployed his forces from Xiapi, advancing north toward Langya. Cui Yuanyong marched from Puyang, facing off against Cao Boping on opposite banks of the Yellow River.

Zhao Changhe shot an arrow across the river and killed Cao Boping from several li away, leaving those on both banks in shock.

The figure ranked 19th on the Ranking of Man has fallen. The rankings shall adjust accordingly.

Everyone stared at the sky, mouths agape.

It was a spectacle of unparalleled magnitude, a story so loud and grand it was impossible to ignore. No one had ever considered using the Tome of Troubled Times for such a bold declaration. It made perfect sense, though... after all, the fallen opponent was a master on the Ranking of Man, and news of such deaths was always broadcasted. And conveniently, the broadcast included Wan Dongliu's movements as part of the same campaign, tying all events together seamlessly.

The shockwave was unmistakable. The Cui Clan and the Cao Gang's joint assault on Langya now gripped the entire world's attention.

Yet, even if someone else could conceive such a strategy, who could actually achieve it?

Even the best archers around measured their effective distance in hundreds of paces. Zhao Changhe's unit of measurement was the li!

Who could shoot an arrow across the entire Yellow River, striking someone several li away with a perfect throat shot? Was this even archery, or was it the power of gods and demons?

This was no ordinary feat, not even within the realm of the Ranking of Heaven. With such power to sway the battlefield, mortal-level combat seemed almost irrelevant.

Zhao Changhe glanced around at his stunned surroundings. "Why are you all just standing there? You don't need me to command the river crossing, do you?"

"Damn it." Cui Yuanyong leaped onto a boat, shouting, "The enemy's morale is shattered! Their will is broken, and even their commander is gone! If we can't cross this river, we might as well throw ourselves in it and die! Set sail!"

Zhao Changhe added nonchalantly, "Don't forget to retrieve my arrow. Those are limited, we can't be wasteful."

Cui Yuanyong: "..."

The fleet surged forward, a dark mass of boats heading for the opposite shore.

On the other side, the stunned soldiers stood frozen for a moment before someone let out a panicked shout. Chaos erupted as they abandoned their ships and fled for their lives. The water strongholds fell into disarray in an instant.

Who would risk their lives for a few months' worth of military pay? Against a god-like figure? No thanks! Unless Desolate Calamity himself emerged to confront Zhao Changhe, this battle was over before it began. But would such a figure stoop to participate in a mere river-crossing skirmish? The thought would probably not even cross his mind.

Not one figure on the Ranking of Heaven would take on such a task. And yet, Zhao Changhe—a man whose strength clearly placed him above mere mortals—seemed utterly unbothered by notions of dignity or self-regard.

But at this moment, no one thought Zhao Changhe lacked dignity. That arrow had been too terrifying, piercing not just a throat but the very morale of an entire army. Even those reading the battle reports many li away were gripped by fear.

It was truly a single arrow that shook the world.

South of Langya, Wan Dongliu looked up at the golden characters in the sky fading into the cold air. A grin spread across his face as he raised his whip, pointing at the small city ahead. “The defending army’s morale must be in shambles. A thousand gold taels go to the first to scale the walls!”

In Guanlong, someone received a secret message delivered by a snow eagle. As they hesitated, the Tome of Troubled Times’ broadcast lit up the sky, dazzling all who saw it.

“So it’s true... In any case, the Cui Clan and the Cao Gang’s pincer attack on the Wang Clan should not yield a swift victory. And since they won’t be able to win fast enough, it would only make sense for reinforcements to be dispatched from the capital. In that case, the capital should now stand defenseless. To let such an opportunity slip away would be a sin!”

Chapter 673: Broke the Rules? So Be It

Neither the Wang Clan nor Desolate Calamity ever anticipated that Zhao Changhe could be so shameless.

How did people fight wars in the past? Cui Wenjing and Wang Daoning fought with mutual understanding and grace. They would often meet far from the battlefield, exchanging polite conversation before leaving their subordinates to fight. Regardless of victory or defeat, they would rarely interfere in the larger conflict, adhering to a code of honor.

Even during the battle at Yanmen, Timur did not throw himself at the pass to personally lead the charge. Sure, he feared being surrounded and having Xia Longyuan descend upon him unexpectedly, but half of it was also about saving face.

For a figure on the Ranking of Heaven to descend into the fray and slaughter a group of soldiers who had not even made any way through the Profound Gate—such behavior would be ridiculed

across the land. Even if the city was won, the general's reputation would be lost. Unless faced with an absolutely desperate situation, few would stoop to such measures.

But Zhao Changhe? He not only abandoned such concerns but reveled in them. After taking out Cao Boping with a single arrow, he gleefully charged into the water strongholds, brandishing his massive saber and carving through the ranks. When the camps lay in shambles, he did not stop. He rode straight toward Juancheng and personally led the assault on its gates.

The defending general at Juancheng did not even put up a fight, surrendering immediately.

Desolate Calamity had imagined a far different scenario. Each side firmly entrenched at their respective bases, holding each other in check while their generals fought prolonged battles over months. Perhaps even the riverbanks alone could become a drawn-out stalemate, dragging on for half a year before the fight reached Langya.

Instead, in just one morning, Zhao Changhe had taken both the riverbank and Juancheng, establishing a major foothold on the eastern bank of the Yellow River.

Securing a strategic base across the river was a severe blow to the Wang Clan's position. Any countermeasure would require pooling all available forces for an all-out assault to reclaim the city. Failing to do so would jeopardize their entire strategic front.

Yet Wang Daozhong found himself powerless to respond.

In such an official civil war, where both sides primarily consisted of former soldiers of the Great Xia, the greatest risk was always defection. The moment the tide turned, some would flee, while others would surrender on the spot, ready to be absorbed into the opposing force. Not only were deserters spared, but they could even remain in service under a new banner with minimal disruption.

Juancheng exemplified this perfectly. From the city lord to the defending general, everyone had once held official posts in the previous dynasty. Cui Yuanyong did not even imprison them. He simply suspended their duties temporarily. Key positions were handed to loyal members of the Cui Clan, while the ranks were purged of soldiers too deeply associated with the Wang Clan. The rest were integrated directly into the Han army, their commands and communications still seamlessly aligned.

The heavily fortified water strongholds on the riverbank, initially staffed with elite forces, saw part of their troops flee. At the same time, the majority switched sides and became soldiers of the Han army. Cui Yuanyong's presence in Juancheng was less about consolidating a strategic base and more about assimilating his new recruits and reorganizing his army. The city itself, rich in supplies to support the water strongholds, had abundant grain and provisions, leaving Cui Yuanyong grinning ear to ear.

Wang Daozhong suddenly realized that what had been an overwhelming numerical advantage for his side had flipped overnight. The Han army now had the upper hand.

The battle of Puyang had followed a similar pattern. Once Puyang fell, the rear was left wide open, and the outcome became a foregone conclusion.

But the trouble did not end there. To the south, Wan Dongliu was attacking like a madman. His forces were much closer to Langya's main camp and could reach it within two days. This was precisely why Wang Daoning had previously sought to eliminate this looming threat. He had assumed that with Wan Tianxiong dead, the Jianghuai region would descend into chaos. Surely, the prideful and unruly Canal Gang fighters wouldn't respect a young and untested leader.

Yet, Zhao Changhe's sudden and inexplicable return from the sea changed everything. With Black Tortoise supporting Wan Dongliu in Jianghuai, Wan Tianxiong's fall barely caused a ripple. Wan Dongliu seamlessly took over all the forces in the region, and rather than grieving his father, he was now in a position to avenge him... and he didn't hesitate for a single breath. The intensity of Wan Dongliu's offensive now far surpassed anything Wan Tianxiong himself could have mustered. It was like expecting a wooden club only to be struck by a spiked mace instead.

Forced to divide their forces to fend off Wan Dongliu's onslaught, the Wang Clan no longer had the strength to concentrate on reclaiming the Juancheng. They could only watch helplessly as Zhao Changhe and Cui Yuanyong consolidated their gains.

At this rate, within ten days, the conflict would escalate into a desperate defense of Langya itself. The once-impressive depth of Qilu now seemed nonexistent.

In his desperation, Wang Daozhong sought out Desolate Calamity. "Lord God, we can't just sit here and wait! If we're surrounded, the battle will be over before it even starts!"

Desolate Calamity opened his eyes from meditation, his expression tinged with frustration. He had yet to fully recover from the injuries Zhao Changhe had inflicted on him, and it had only been three or four days. Yet Zhao Changhe had already crossed the river...

“Don’t panic,” Desolate Calamity said. “I’ve been reflecting on my clash with Zhao Changhe. His true strength isn’t exceptional; his power relies entirely on divine weapons. Ultimately, the power of a divine weapon is not his own. I now know how to counter it. Even if the fight comes to Langya, I can ensure he won’t be able to leave alive.”

Wang Daozhong sighed. “If the decisive battle happens in Langya itself, the city will be ruined by the end of it. What’s the point then?”

Desolate Calamity’s tone darkened. “Even if I leave to deal with Zhao Changhe, can you fend off Cui Yuanyong and Wan Dongliu’s pincer attack?”

“No,” Wang Daozhong answered honestly.

“Then...” Huangyang’s lips curved into a sinister smile. “Since Zhao Changhe is willing to personally engage ordinary soldiers, why must my target be Zhao Changhe? Zhao Changhe rose from the wilds and hasn’t yet grasped why true Ranking of Heaven elites avoid involving themselves in mundane battles—let alone those of god-like power. When you break the rules, others will do the same, and you will bear the consequences.”

Wang Daozhong’s eyes lit up. “Lord God, you mean...”

“If I go west, I’ll only end up in a stalemate with Zhao Changhe. It’ll take me a while to get rid of him. But if I go south... the Cao Gang’s forces of 100,000 are nothing but a swarm of ants to me. What if I help you crush them instead?”

Wang Daozhong’s face broke into a wide grin. “If that happens, Langya will be safe!”

Desolate Calamity chuckled softly before disappearing in a flash.

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At this moment, Wan Dongliu had already taken Tancheng. Ahead lay Lanling, the last defensive line south of Langya. His march north from Xuzhou brought him dangerously close to his goal.

Despite this proximity, he refrained from advancing further, instead setting up camp in Tancheng to regroup and prepare.

It was prudent to wait for the western front to progress and for Cui Yuanyong's forces to join his before pushing forward. Moving alone carried the risk of being isolated and defeated. The two forces were not far apart—if Cui Yuanyong could maintain his momentum, take two more cities, and cross Weishan Lake, their armies would unite.

Even so, the gap between them left them vulnerable. A sudden assault on either force would leave the other unable to offer timely support. Aware of the risk, Wan Dongliu focused on fortifying the city's defenses, refusing to let his guard down. He even patrolled personally late into the night, unwilling to sleep.

And so, night fell.

Wan Dongliu stood atop the city walls, gazing at the moon. The night was clear, with no snow—just a bright, sparse sky of stars.

The end of the year was near, yet oddly, the closer he got to Langya, the more he felt a strange heat in the air. It was not warmth in the usual sense—after all, the weather was still bitterly cold—but a parching dryness that left the land barren, preventing even snow from falling.

This was a time when gods and demons roamed the world, a time when the natural order often defied human understanding. Wan Dongliu was acutely aware of the dangers of this war. The enemies they faced were no longer mortal.

When the disparity in power became insurmountable, numbers ceased to matter. Even a million soldiers could not hold back the collapse of a mountain.

Zhao Changhe's single arrow had rendered the Yellow River, once an unbreachable natural barrier, meaningless. And their enemies? Surely, they would not foolishly confront Zhao Changhe in a one-on-one duel.

No, Wan Dongliu suspected their greatest adversary might come here, and he could not shake that thought.

But he did not falter. Whether driven by his duty to avenge his father or by the unwavering convictions instilled in him since childhood, retreat was not an option.

Suddenly, the city walls began to tremble faintly as if an earthquake had struck. The officers around him tensed up. “Young Master, it feels like an earthquake! Please come down from the wall and move to an open area...”

“You all go on ahead,” Wan Dongliu said with a faint smile. He slowly pulled out a dark, blue mask from his robe and placed it over his face.

The officers: “?”

Wan Dongliu tilted his head back, looking at the moon, his voice calm and steady. “I am Water Worm of Zhen of the Twenty-Eight Mansions, under the command of the Night Emperor. Greetings, Desolate Calamity.”

The air shimmered unnaturally, and the demon materialized in the void, his expression tinged with surprise. “Surely you don’t think I’ll spare you out of deference to the Night Emperor?”

Wan Dongliu chuckled. “Not at all.”

“Then what is the meaning of this?”

Wan Dongliu’s voice remained composed as he replied, “The holy cult has already risen to prominence. There’s no need to hide anymore. This mask enhances my strength and defenses, even if only slightly.”

Desolate Calamity let out a laugh, as though he had just heard the most absurd joke in the world. “You... intend to fight me?”

“Even if I’m unable to withstand a single strike, I believe this to still be better than dying without putting up a fight.”

“Have you not considered surrender?”

“Never,” Wan Dongliu said calmly. “Of course, the mask also holds another significance.”

“What is it?”

“As a follower of the Night Emperor, I wish to see if my god will come to save me. I wish to find out if faith in gods and demons holds any meaning.”

“Ha... Hahahahaha!” Desolate Calamity laughed so hard he bent over, his voice echoing in the night. “Don’t bother! Your so-called Night Emperor has long since perished! Hahaha!”

Wan Dongliu’s tone remained steady. “I don’t believe that a demon god who could not even defeat Azure Dragon has the right to speak on the Night Emperor’s life or death. Frankly, I doubt you were ever worthy of an audience with the Night Emperor.”

Desolate Calamity’s laughter twisted into a snarl. “Then you can ask him yourself in the afterlife!”

Boom!

With a deafening boom, the city wall suddenly crumbled, sending Wan Dongliu plummeting to the ground below. Countless stone blocks rained down, threatening to bury him alive.

Wan Dongliu twisted his body nimbly, narrowly dodging the falling stones. Above him, Desolate Calamity descended from the air, his desiccated form eclipsing the moonlight. His withered hand reached out, poised to strike. “Die, insect.”

But before the blow landed, a sudden jolt surged through Desolate Calamity’s heart. His hand veered sharply to the side, swatting away a golden arrow that had appeared silently in front of him. The force of his deflection sent the arrow careening into the rubble.

“Zhao Changhe!” Desolate Calamity bellowed, spinning around.

Under the full moon, Zhao Changhe rode a flying steed, his massive saber gleaming in his hands. With a wild grin, he roared, “I knew you’d stoop to this!”

Beneath his mask, Wan Dongliu's face lit up with fervent exhilaration. The same fiery zeal reflected in the eyes of the followers of the Four Idols Cult behind him—and even in the expressions of the Cao Gang soldiers who were now being converted to the cult's cause.

Zhao Changhe's arrival made perfect sense. It was logical for Desolate Calamity to target Wan Dongliu, just as it was reasonable for Wan Dongliu to suspect an attack. Zhao Changhe, ever the strategist, had anticipated this move and acted accordingly. His appearance was not divine intervention; it was a calculated action.

But none of that mattered. The sheer morale boost was overwhelming. The sight of Zhao Changhe riding in like a storm electrified the crowd. Wan Dongliu did not even entertain the thought of Zhao Changhe losing this fight. Without hesitation, he led his forces into the city with a resounding battle cry, "There must be reinforcements on their way to fortify Lanling's defenses! Everyone, follow me! We'll catch them off guard!"

Chapter 674: Fighting Desolate Calamity Once Again

Desolate Calamity hovered in the air, gazing down at the scene below with an ugly expression.

He had collapsed one side of the city wall, setting the stage for the Wang Clan's forces to swoop in and claim the city. Instead, the situation had taken a bizarre turn. Rather than Wan Dongliu being slaughtered, he was gleefully leading his troops out for an ambush. The thought of how this would look—Wang Daozhong's forces running headlong into a well-prepared strike—was almost too embarrassing to imagine.

It almost made Desolate Calamity feel like a traitor sabotaging Wang Daozhong's efforts.

Yet he could not afford to disengage from his own personal fight to deal with Wan Dongliu's army. Zhao Changhe stood before him, holding Dragon Bird in one hand and River of Stars in the other, his predatory gaze locked on Desolate Calamity. Any lapse in focus could lead to catastrophic consequences. He had to deal with Zhao Changhe first.

Zhao Changhe patted his Snow-Treading Crow, signaling it to retreat. Both man and god wore grave expressions, fully aware that this battle was different from their last encounter. This time, there was no room to retreat.

Previously, they both had fallback options. If Zhao Changhe lost, he could simply flee. The worst-case scenario was the Cui Clan pledging allegiance to the Wang Clan, a situation that could potentially be reversed later, perhaps even by killing Desolate Calamity in the future. Similarly,

Desolate Calamity could retreat, get himself together, and finish off Zhao Changhe another day. The balance of power had not been so absolute.

But this time, if Zhao Changhe lost, the Cui Clan in the rear would face a brutal retaliation. As Cui Yuanyong had said, “You’d better make sure you keep getting stronger. If you mess up, the Cui Clan will be done for!” Likewise, if Desolate Calamity lost, the Wang Clan’s forces would be wiped out, and the entire clan exterminated. There were no second chances for either side.

Well, technically speaking, Desolate Calamity was slightly better off. He could abandon the Wang Clan and pursue his goals through other means. But for Zhao Changhe, there was no running.

In this era where gods and demons had descended upon the world, battles were increasingly determined by the deities and powers supporting each side. Conventional logic no longer applied, and this fight underscored that shift.

Desolate Calamity’s gaze shifted to the sword and saber in Zhao Changhe’s hands. Slowly, he said, “You shot that arrow, not because you were ignorant of the unspoken rules, but because you knew precisely how I would retaliate. You were waiting for me... It seems you were expecting me to come here.”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “So, you’re not completely stupid.”

Desolate Calamity’s voice turned icy. “Breaking these rules... Aren’t you afraid that others will follow suit, leaving the world in endless turmoil?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Have you been buried underground so long that your brain rotted? You fought me once, and you know I have the power of gods and demons. You might think I should adhere to these rules, but in everyone else’s eyes, I’m just Zhao Changhe, second on the Ranking of Earth. And the fact is, I am just second on the Ranking of Earth. A Ranking of Earth fighter participating in battles like this and shooting someone on the Ranking of Man—what rule does that break?”

Desolate Calamity: “...”

Zhao Changhe grinned, his tone turning playful, “So, doesn’t this bring us right back to where you imagined we’d be? Their victory or defeat has got nothing to do with us, does it?”

Desolate Calamity laughed out of sheer anger and exasperation. “You’ve taken every possible advantage. Your side is already on the verge of encircling Langya, and now you want to claim we’re just here for a duel, uninvolved in their battles?”

Then, his tone turned icy. “But for all your calculations, don’t you think you’ve overlooked one teensy weensy, but ever so crucial little, tiny detail? You are no match for me! And when you suffer a crushing defeat here, all of your careful planning will be nothing more than a joke.”

“I don’t deny that I lack absolute confidence in defeating you,” Zhao Changhe replied with a wry smile. “But tell me, when did it become necessary to believe you’d certainly win before daring to fight? Is it that your courage has been worn away over two endless eras, or did you lose your nerve entirely in the cataclysmic collapse of the last one?”

Desolate Calamity’s gaze grew colder.

“Let me remind the gods and demons of one simple, eternal truth,” Zhao Changhe continued, his grin widening. “When two warriors meet on a narrow path, victory belongs to the one with the courage to step forward.”

As he spoke, Dragon Bird quivered faintly, its blade vanishing into the darkness of the night. Desolate Calamity could not even see the path of the strike before a chilling sensation brushed against his neck.

For a moment, it felt as though time itself had stopped. All that remained in the world was the blade, cutting through everything—leaving nothing else.

No Man’s Land!

Desolate Calamity reacted swiftly, striking the side of Dragon Bird with his palm. Zhao Changhe felt the ground beneath him surge with energy as Desolate Calamity manipulated the earth’s veins. Not only did it amplify his mummified strength, but a strange, insidious pull emanated from the ground, seeking to drain Zhao Changhe’s very life force. It was as though the vitality of the living was being leached away into the desolate earth.

This time, there was no testing the waters. Both of them unleashed their ultimate techniques from the start.

For Desolate Calamity, who could absorb the life force of fertile lands to nourish himself, draining the vitality of his opponent was second nature. It was a perfect countermeasure against someone wielding divine weapons but lacking sufficient cultivation to resist.

Clang!

The collision between Desolate Calamity's palm and Dragon Bird sent both combatants flying backward. Zhao Changhe retreated slightly further, but there was no visible sign that his life force had been affected.

Desolate Calamity froze in disbelief. "You're actually able to resist? That shouldn't be possible..."

Zhao Changhe chuckled but did not elaborate. Between the vitality granted by the Azure Dragon's essence and the foundational strength of the Rejuvenation Art, his life force was as solid as a mountain. Not to mention, his dual cultivation with Chichi was far from a waste of time. Maintaining the integrity of his life force was practically second nature. Moreover, Desolate Calamity had been defeated precisely by the Azure Dragon. This was not just resistance, it was a perfect counter.

He did not answer, but as he retreated, his left hand thrust forward with River of Stars. "I told you: you've slept too long to understand the heroes of this era!"

With the thrust of his sword, the moonlight above suddenly brightened, and a beam of radiance descended from the heavens. It struck a previously invisible strand of energy that Desolate Calamity had silently unleashed—a hidden attack Zhao Changhe had anticipated and intercepted perfectly.

The heavenly radiance clashed against Desolate Calamity's hidden strike, neutralizing it. Without resistance, the River of Star's sword qi surged forward, aiming directly at Desolate Calamity's chest.

Desolate Calamity moved with lightning speed, vanishing from the sword's path and reappearing beside Zhao Changhe in an instant.

His speed was not just faster but significantly faster than Zhao Changhe's.

Zhao Changhe showed no trace of fear or surprise. His sword and saber spun in seamless arcs, clashing against Desolate Calamity's strikes in rapid succession. In mere moments, they exchanged countless blows.

Even Desolate Calamity could not help but feel a grudging respect. It was said that Zhao Changhe had only been cultivating for just over two years, which initially made him expect the man's skills to be riddled with gaps from hastened growth. Yet, after two battles, he found no glaring flaws. Zhao Changhe's mastery of the sword and saber was as smooth and seamless as the circle of yin and yang. His techniques had already reached a state of returning to simplicity, fully aligned with his level of cultivation.

Despite his own overwhelming advantage in cultivation, Desolate Calamity found himself frustrated by Zhao Changhe's twin divine weapons, which neutralized much of his edge. Most troubling was the seeming futility of his innate domain over the earth—Zhao Changhe appeared completely unaffected, as if he embodied the essence of the Azure Dragon himself.

Still, the Profound Control Realm was not that simple. For example, his control over the earth was not just about absorbing life force or vitality to nourish himself, it also had another aspect to it...

As the fight dragged on, Zhao Changhe began to notice something unsettling. The power of the earth seemed to be unraveling around him. His sense of connection with the natural world—something he had painstakingly developed since unlocking the Profound Mysteries—was being severed.

This connection with heaven and earth was something he had sought wholeheartedly when he broke through to the Profound Mysteries Realm. First, he sensed the power of heaven and earth, resonating with the surrounding vicious blood qi. Second, he formed a bridge with heaven and earth, granting him a continuous flow of energy. Third, his five senses were enhanced—his Back Eye had evolved into a full birds'eye view, and even without it, his night vision, long-distance vision, and attention to detail had all been greatly improved.

Now, one by one, those abilities were slipping away. Even the vicious blood qi in his surroundings—a form of energy he had learned to manipulate so naturally—was fading from his perception.

Desolate Calamity's strategy was brutally effective. No matter how powerful Zhao Changhe's sword and saber were, their true potential depended on their user. If the user lost control—unable to sense or react to threats in time—then even the finest weapon would become a liability. And for someone with Zhao Changhe's relatively limited cultivation, severing his connection to the natural

world would leave him blind to Desolate Calamity's movements, forcing him to rely entirely on the weapons' protective instincts.

For days, Desolate Calamity had pondered on this approach. And now, it was paying off.

Clang!

Desolate Calamity's palm struck Dragon Bird, forcing Zhao Changhe back. In the same instant, his other hand lashed out soundlessly toward Zhao Changhe's abdomen.

It was fast, faster than anything Zhao Changhe had faced before.

There was no visible trajectory, no telltale signs. It was swifter and more elusive than even Zhao Changhe's prized No Man's Land.

With his connection to heaven and earth severed, his heightened senses dulled, there was no way Zhao Changhe could perceive this attack. Only the automatic protective instincts of his divine weapons could respond.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, River of Stars moved on its own, slashing toward Desolate Calamity's wrist and deflecting the strike.

Zhao Changhe's expression betrayed a flicker of shock—clearly, he had not registered the attack in time. River of Stars had acted entirely on its own.

The strategy was working.

If Desolate Calamity kept the pressure on, Zhao Changhe would inevitably falter.

Strength is strength—relying on external tools is futile... and relying on some so-called courage is even more laughable.

Desolate Calamity allowed a faint smile to creep across his face as he raised a hand. Out of nowhere, countless attacks materialized, converging on Zhao Changhe from all sides.

Zhao Changhe's sword and saber moved in a dazzling display, deflecting the barrage of strikes with swift precision.

However, hidden among the attacks were several soundless, invisible blows. Zhao Changhe failed to notice them entirely, grunting as they struck him squarely. A faint shimmering barrier emerged around him, neutralizing the sneaky assault.

It was a barrier of vigorous qi taught by the Divine Brilliance Sect, something Zhao Changhe rarely used due to its short duration, reserved only for emergencies. And now, even that trump card had been forced out.

But as the barrier of vigorous qi dissipated, yet another silent, formless attack surged from beneath the ground—a spectral hand that lashed out, clawing viciously at Zhao Changhe's ankle.

This was Desolate Calamity's true trump card: merging with the earth to launch an almost undetectable assault, exploiting the moment Zhao Changhe's focus was elsewhere.

If this blow landed, Zhao Changhe's leg would be rendered useless!

From beneath the earth, Desolate Calamity's lips twisted into a cruel grin. His hand made contact, clutching Zhao Changhe's ankle firmly. But then, his grin froze.

River of Stars had somehow slipped into the ground without a trace, cleaner and quieter than even Desolate Calamity's own movements. While he concentrated on his ambush, River of Stars suddenly erupted from the soil, thrusting viciously toward his abdomen!

Desolate Calamity retracted his hand with lightning speed, but Zhao Changhe seized the opportunity. He reached toward the ground with his free hand, unleashing a mighty force that gripped Desolate Calamity's wrist like a vice, holding him in place for a critical instant.

That momentary lapse was enough.

River of Stars struck true, cutting into Desolate Calamity's left shoulder before he broke free from Zhao Changhe's grip and retreated from the earth. As he held his wounded arm, his expression was a mix of shock and disbelief. "You were pretending all along?"

Zhao Changhe was catching his breath after the rapid exchange, subtly recovering his strength. He smirked, using the conversation to buy time. “Correct. Your entire performance looked like a clown act to me from the start.”

Desolate Calamity’s disbelief deepened. “It’s one thing for you to resist my life drain, but how could you possibly withstand the disruption of the earth’s veins? If you truly could, you’d already be at the Profound Control Realm!”

Zhao Changhe sighed dramatically. Damn it... You forced me to use the Back Eye. That’s something I should never have had to resort to. I wonder if that blind woman will laugh her ass off when she finds out.

It was not just the Back Eye. Even the Heavenly Tome, which Xia Longyuan had advised him to rely on sparingly, had been heavily used this time.

Without countless simulations of this fight in the illusory world of the Heavenly Tome, there was no way this battle could have gone so smoothly.

What came next did not matter—he could not afford to think about the cost for now. Against an enemy at the Profound Control Realm, especially one who had figured out how to counter his divine weapons, Zhao Changhe knew his own raw power alone would not be enough.

You’re impressive, but I’m a premium user. I have cheats, several even.

Chapter 675: Victory Belongs to the One With the Courage to Fight.

The most infuriating among Zhao Changhe’s “cheats” was a certain buff applied to all his weapons: the ability to harm the soul.

Even the slightest scratch would immediately disrupt his opponent’s soul, forcing them to expend a significant amount of energy to suppress the turmoil. What seemed like a minor injury at first sight was, in truth, devastating.

For someone weaker, even the faintest graze could easily be fatal.

Desolate Calamity, who had slept through an entire epoch, felt a strong urge to weep. In the previous era, soul-harming treasures were so rare they were practically unheard of. Yet here was

Zhao Changhe—not only did he have them, but he had many of them. Even his freaking arrows had these properties! The extravagance was simply maddening!

But despite his flashy advantages, Zhao Changhe had not won yet. Similar to their last encounter, he was putting up a facade of overwhelming strength.

Desolate Calamity's strategy to sever Zhao Changhe's connection to the natural world had in fact succeeded. Zhao Changhe's ability to perceive and counter his movements relied heavily on the Back Eye rather than his own senses. This was not just a minor sensory impairment—it was a profound disruption. More importantly, Zhao Changhe had lost not only his enhanced perception but also his ability to harness external energies to replenish himself.

The longer the fight dragged on, the less favorable it was for Zhao Changhe. Thus, his goal was to force Desolate Calamity to retreat before his energy ran out.

Desolate Calamity observed the seemingly calm and composed Zhao Changhe, his mind swirling with doubt. How could Zhao Changhe be unaffected by his disruption of the earth's veins? Without achieving the Profound Control Realm, it should not have been possible to counter this technique.

Is it truly worth continuing the fight to test whether Zhao Changhe is truly as strong as he appears?

Zhao Changhe caught the flicker of hesitation in Desolate Calamity's eyes and laughed. "So, you still want to fight to the death? You've improved since last time. Well then, have at it. Look out for my saber!"

With those words, Zhao Changhe's arm suddenly bulged with power. Dragon Bird screamed through the air, slashing down in a crude, explosive style that the weapon itself might have mocked if it had the leisure to speak right now. It was an attack that evoked the imagery of a toad's clumsy leap, but the sheer ferocity behind it was undeniable.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Desolate Calamity looked up. Against the backlit moon, Zhao Changhe's shadow loomed with fiery red eyes, exuding a feral, bloodthirsty aura. A chill ran down Desolate Calamity's spine, his damaged soul wavering under the oppressive force. This was a glimpse of the terror Zhao Changhe could evoke in his opponents.

Desolate Calamity took a deep breath, forcing his mind to steady. With a dry, snapping motion, his withered hand shot forward to meet the attack head-on, testing the true extent of Zhao Changhe's strength.

His palm struck the side of the saber. Both fighters staggered from the impact, but Desolate Calamity suddenly felt a violent surge of vicious qi coursing through his body. His blood and qi roiled uncontrollably, threatening to burst from his veins. With his soul already injured, he found himself struggling to withstand the force of Zhao Changhe's profound control.

Yes, this was profound control.

The journey of every martial artist during the Profound Mysteries Realm was a quest to connect with the natural world, to command their surroundings and internalize their control over power. This was the essence of profound control—to have command of a domain. Zhao Changhe's entire path had been about refining his ability to command the power of vicious blood qi: his own, his opponent's, the environment's, and even the world's.

When this control reached a certain level, it meant stepping into the Profound Control Realm.

Facing an opponent of Desolate Calamity's caliber, Zhao Changhe could only summon his own vicious blood qi. He originally could not influence the energy within Desolate Calamity at all. But now, with Desolate Calamity's soul in a weakened state, there was an opening!

The situation had flipped. Desolate Calamity could not drain Zhao Changhe's life force, but Zhao Changhe could influence Desolate Calamity's vicious blood qi. For a moment, Desolate Calamity himself was not sure who was truly at the Profound Control Realm. The sheer lack of impact of his techniques on Zhao Changhe was baffling.

Unbeknownst to all, within Dragon Bird, a fierce little girl was gritting her teeth and pouring her strength into the fight. This power was not entirely Zhao Changhe's—it came from the saber spirit. As a weapon that had grown alongside Zhao Changhe, bonded through the power of vicious blood, the saber spirit had almost become an extension of its wielder, seamlessly mirroring his abilities.

This was the true value of a life-bound weapon.

Desolate Calamity struggled desperately to suppress the turbulence of his vicious blood. Finally, he broke away, retreating into the air with the clear intent to flee.

He had completely lost the will to fight. His opponent was simply too strange. None of his methods worked. Despite holding a cultivation level far above Zhao Changhe, he could not gain the upper hand. If he pushed further, he risked dying here. There was no point in continuing.

But the moment he turned to flee, abandoning his control over the disrupted earth's veins, the vicious blood qi in the battlefield erupted like a storm. Countless crimson blades filled the air, forming a sea of blood so dense that every strand of light seemed to shimmer with the edge of a blade.

Bloodied Mountains and Rivers!

This was the battlefield of Tancheng, and Wan Dongliu's forces had just stormed the city. Countless souls, brimming with hatred and vengeance, had perished here, saturating the area with raw vicious blood. Earlier, Zhao Changhe had been unable to tap into it due to Desolate Calamity's suppression. But the instant Desolate Calamity turned to flee, Zhao Changhe's connection returned. He seized the opportunity, unleashing the most ferocious and potent strike he had ever executed since breaking into the third layer of the Profound Mysteries.

When two warriors meet on a narrow path, victory belongs to the one with the courage to step forward.

If Desolate Calamity had stayed and fought, Zhao Changhe would almost certainly have lost. He was running on fumes, almost completely out of stamina. But since the demon decided to flee, the tide turned, and the outcome was thus decided.

Boom!

A deafening explosion echoed across the battlefield as the bloodstorm descended. Desolate Calamity marshaled all his strength to withstand the relentless torrent of razor-sharp blood energy, only to lift his gaze and find River of Stars floating high in the sky. Starlight poured down, illuminating the heavens as countless stars began to fall like a celestial avalanche.

There's more?

Around him was a sea of blood. Above him, a cascade of falling stars.

At that moment, Desolate Calamity felt as if he had been thrust back to the end of an era—the collapse of the previous era, the apocalyptic scenes of destruction.

And the one causing it all was just a mortal cultivator, someone merely at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Desolate Calamity, his mind shaken, could not help but feel as though even a reborn Night Emperor could have done no better than this.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The falling stars crashed into the battlefield, battering Desolate Calamity with the combined force of a sea of blood and falling stars. He poured every ounce of his strength into defending himself, barely escaping the maelstrom of blades and meteors. His once-mummified body was now shredded to tatters, resembling a bundle of rags.

As he fled, his battered form drifted away like tattered cloth. It was impossible to tell how long he would need to recover from this defeat—or whether he ever truly could.

Zhao Changhe spat out a mouthful of blood, leaning weakly on Dragon Bird for support as he gasped for air.

Even after all that, he could not kill him... An opponent at the Profound Control Realm was ultimately not someone easily defeated across tiers. Replicating the story of ambushing and slaying the Sea Emperor was a pipe dream.

He did not bother chasing after Desolate Calamity. Instead, he raised a hand and pointed at River of Stars, which was suspended mid-air. The sword shot forward like a comet, streaking into the darkness behind him.

Clang!

The crisp sound of metal clashing echoed. River of Stars recoiled and flew back, just as Snow Treading Crow charged from the distance. Catching River of Stars mid-air, Zhao Changhe leaped onto Snow-Treading Crow's back and galloped southward at full speed.

A shadow emerged from the darkness like a ghost, relentlessly pursuing him.

The choice to unleash an area-wide attack, like a storm of falling stars over a mountain of corpses and rivers of blood, rather than concentrating all his power on a single point, was deliberate. He had anticipated another predator lurking in the shadows. Only with such an expansive attack could he ward off a sneak attack.

Now, however, Zhao Changhe's condition was far from suitable for dealing with the shadow behind him. His only option was to rely on Snow-Treading Crow's speed to escape.

The pursuer sighed from the rear, his voice carrying through the night. "The Blood Asura lives up to his renown. We old corpses truly feel our age when we see someone like you."

Clutching Snow-Treading Crow's neck, Zhao Changhe turned back and sneered coldly. "Since you know you're an old corpse, why not crawl back into your damn grave? What's the point of showing your face here?"

The pursuer ignored the taunt and continued the chase.

This gave Zhao Changhe some peace of mind. Earlier, he had feared this shadow might aim to attack the Cui Clan or the troops of the Cao Gang. Now it was clear this figure had no connection to Desolate Calamity.

Everyone had their own agenda, even gods and demons. Desolate Calamity sought power tied to the earth's veins and would work through mortal proxies. But for many other divine beings, mortal conflicts held no value—barely worth a glance.

This one, more likely than not, had come for the Heavenly Tome. Mortal battles were meaningless to him, mere noise in the background.

Possessing treasure invites envy. Zhao Changhe had known from the start that the Heavenly Tome would draw countless greedy eyes. It had only been a little over ten days, and the first already came knocking.

What he did not expect, however, was how crude the other party's approach would be—lurking in the shadows to watch his battle with Desolate Calamity, trying to reap the benefits when both others were worn and weakened.

This is supposed to be a god?

Rather than irritation, Zhao Changhe felt an overwhelming surge of heroic fervor. Galloping under the moonlight, his laughter echoed across the night sky. “Old Xia was right... A bunch of decrepit corpses, scheming and scrambling like rats and dogs, yet daring to call themselves gods and demons! You should’ve all perished in the collapse of the previous era. Even the Heavenly Dao deemed you unworthy of remaining in this world! Sadly, the Heavenly Dao couldn’t finish the job, and Old Xia couldn’t finish it either. So I’ll take over!”

He swallowed a pill, silently activating the Rejuvenation Art. The energies of heaven and earth coursed through his body, gradually restoring his depleted strength and healing his internal injuries as he galloped.

“One decisive strike to prevent a hundred weaker ones.” Zhao Changhe pulled Snow-Treading Crow to a sudden stop, turned, and nocked an arrow to his bow. His voice resounded across the night. “The Heavenly Tome is here! If you’ve got the guts, come and take it!”

Whoosh!

The arrow tore through the air as if issuing out a war cry, a challenge issued to all gods and demons.

Within River of Stars, the spirit embryo stirred, its eyes opening. Its body began to stretch and grow.

Chapter 676: Hidden Wind

The nascent sword spirit could not communicate. Meanwhile, Dragon Bird was almost in tears. “You fool, you said yourself that each of those arrows is irreplaceable, yet you’re still shooting them around so wastefully! You didn’t even bother retrieving the one you used to save Wan Dongliu earlier, and now you’re shooting another at random! What a spendthrift! Utterly wasteful!”

Feeling rather heroic a moment ago, Zhao Changhe nearly fell off his horse in disbelief.

Who even are you to lecture me like you’re running my household?

That said, the rebuke from Dragon Bird made him reflect. He did feel a pang of regret. Those arrows, carved from Dragon Soul Wood, numbered only two or three dozen—hardly enough to squander carelessly. He could only hope to retrieve the two that had fallen near the city once the battle was over.

But that was reliant on them winning... With him being chased away like this, he could not even participate in the battle over there. The outcome would now rest entirely on Cui Yuanyong and Wan Dongliu's shoulders.

Surely they won't lose, right?

In the current chaotic world, there were few worthy allies, and among the younger generation, notable talents were even rarer. Yet here, they had two. Add to that Yangyang from Qinghe, Xue Canghai with the Blood God Array Plate, and the hidden agents they had planted in Langya long ago...

In any case, he could not just turn around and fight now. He had just fought beyond his limits, and no matter how many pills he took to recover, it was impossible for him to immediately return to his peak. Moreover, both River and Stars and Dragon Bird had expended a lot of energy and needed time to recover. And most importantly, he did not know much about his opponent, while his own techniques had been observed for a while. Recklessly engaging now would be a losing proposition.

Zhao Changhe maintained his composure, using the pursuit to gauge his opponent's strength while buying time for the Dragon Bird and River of Stars to recover.

The pursuer was formidable, gradually closing the distance. Though only slightly faster than Snow-Treading Crow, it was enough to make catching up seem inevitable, albeit slow. Still, this kind of speed was abnormal—the other party was not running but flying. What kind of power could propel someone to fly as fast as a dragon horse?

The pursuer seemed relaxed, his posture oddly elegant.

If he's using some form of profound control... Could it be over the wind?

With an unhurried tone, the pursuer spoke, "You can flee for now, but ultimately, you will be caught. Meanwhile, you're unable to join the battle at Langya. Without someone like you as a pillar of support, they may face disastrous defeat. Is this really worth it? It might be better to stick to your words. When two warriors meet on a narrow path, victory belongs to the one with the courage to step forward."

Despite being likened to rats and dogs earlier, the pursuer seemed unbothered, his tone calm and composed.

Zhao Changhe retorted without hesitation, “What I do is none of your damn business.”

That clearly caught the pursuer off guard, leaving him speechless for a moment before he managed to respond, “In a way, it actually is my business. I’d prefer you to gain the upper hand in these power struggles.”

Zhao Changhe was taken aback. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Because mortal alliances are just a weakness that drags you down. If you were always roaming freely like you are now, those seeking the Heavenly Tome would have a much harder time tracking you down. But with you tethered by attachments and concerns, mired in mortal conflicts, it’s a blessing for those of us who are after the Heavenly Tome.”

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

These words struck a sensitive spot within him. Once, Zhao Changhe had roamed freely across the world, a wandering soul unburdened by worldly attachments. Back then, those who sought his life could not even find him, let alone strike him down. Poor Frost Hawk, now chilling in the underworld, knew that best.

But the moment he became invested in the mountains and rivers before him, trouble began to pile up. It reminded him of Xia Longyuan’s struggles: if one sought the pinnacle of martial arts, why shackle oneself to the throne?

Perhaps this was why Chichi and Wanzhuang had let him leave the capital alone, even after so much hesitation. They must have understood this truth.

The pursuer, seeing that all his words could not persuade Zhao Changhe into a duel, sighed in mild exasperation. This posturing and running behavior clearly annoyed him. “The Asura King’s horse... is quite intriguing.”

Zhao Changhe glanced back. “What’s the matter? Don’t have a horse of your own?”

The pursuer did not realize Zhao Changhe was mocking him and chuckled. "Forgive me. I've slept too long and I have few possessions."

Zhao Changhe couldn't help but laugh. "So now you want everything you see?"

"Not quite. As you said, I'm only interested in the Heavenly Tome." The man, surprisingly, began speaking on history. "In our time, it was not uncommon to ride exotic beasts, but it's rare to see someone elevate an ordinary horse to this extent. Such feats come with a steep price. From what I can tell, you poured your dragon qi into this horse."

"My kingdom for a horse!" Zhao Changhe laughed. "You should understand the reason better than most."

"Indeed," the pursuer said with a faint air of melancholy. "Kingdoms and mortal concerns are fleeting, mere clouds in the wind. Only power is eternal. Still, it's rare to see someone so sentimental about a horse."

Zhao Changhe smirked. "It's being put to good use, isn't it? Aren't you tired of chasing me yet?"

"..." The pursuer did not answer. Was he tired? Not really. But he also knew Zhao Changhe was using this prolonged chase to recover his strength. The longer it dragged on, the more advantageous it became for Zhao Changhe. Who would have thought, when sneaking in to reap the spoils, that Zhao Changhe would have a flying horse?

Zhao Changhe's decision to keep Snow-Treading Crow by his side was proving to be a stroke of genius.

Glancing back at the increasingly frustrated pursuer, Zhao Changhe suddenly asked, "What's your name?"

The man said calmly, "Hidden Wind. I doubt you've heard of me."

Indeed, Zhao Changhe had never heard of it. None of the records he had come across mentioned this name. Still, it was clear from the man's abilities that his abilities were related to the wind.

With no real purpose, Zhao Changhe continued, “As far as I know, your era didn’t have a Heavenly Tome. How do you know about it?”

“That’s not entirely true. Everyone knew that the Heavenly Tome was under the control of the Heavenly Dao, beyond the reach of mortals. After the Heavenly Dao collapsed, fragments of the Heavenly Tome scattered. In those final moments, some attempted to seize its remnants but failed to do so in time... And then there’s someone like you—a mere mortal who, in two years, has gotten to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. Such achievements are unheard of in history.”

As Hidden Wind spoke, his eyes burned with fervent light. It was evident he attributed all of Zhao Changhe’s extraordinary feats to the Heavenly Tome.

Zhao Changhe ignored him, though his thoughts wandered to the past.

It isn’t entirely true that no one succeeded. The Night Emperor managed to obtain the page pertaining to the general outline of martial arts and left it with Shuanghua... Which, in and of itself, is quite strange. Why did he entrust the Heavenly Tome to her instead of using it himself?

As if reading his mind, Hidden Wind’s next words seemed to address the very question. “Too much power may not necessarily be a good thing. During the collapse of the last era, it wasn’t just the heaven and earth that collapsed—there seemed to be some special attention given to powerful beings as well. The four idols of antiquity, once so glorious, all perished; not one survived. Even the fate of the Night Emperor remains uncertain. As for the mighty Sea Emperor, if not for collaborating with Hai Pinglan to harness the power of faith, he’d likely still be a wisp of a remnant soul, barely clinging to existence in the ocean depths. Meanwhile, those of us whom they once dismissed as insignificant have suffered far less...”

Zhao Changhe’s mind stirred at this revelation.

It was possible that the collapse indeed had a targeted aspect to it. So far, other than the Sea Emperor, who had revived with the aid of faith, there had been no signs of figures like the Sword Emperor—at the second layer or above of the Profound Control Realm—reappearing. The so-called gods and demons Zhao Changhe had encountered, such as Xue Wu, Duoluo, and Desolate Calamity, all belonged to the first layer of the Profound Control Realm. Strictly speaking, they did not truly qualify as gods or demons.

Perhaps back then, the stronger they were, the quicker they fell—or the more severe their injuries. The varied intensity of the “purge” they faced seemed to explain the results.

This led to another thought: perhaps the Night Emperor foresaw such an outcome and judged that Shuanghua had a higher chance of survival or that she would awaken sooner. Thus, he entrusted the Heavenly Tome to her, believing she could use it to rise again. But Shuanghua had no will to live on, and she left behind naught but the sorrowful wail of Iceheart.

These thoughts flashed through Zhao Changhe's mind, but his curiosity prevailed. "Why are you telling me all this? Are you trying to warn me not to cultivate too quickly or I might bring disaster upon myself?"

"Precisely," Hidden Wind replied. "You know what they say, the tallest tree in the forest is the first to be felled by the wind. Beyond that, your monopolization of so many pages of the Heavenly Tome is contrary to the Heavenly Dao. The Heavenly Dao takes from the surplus to replenish the deficient; you should be aware of this principle. If the Heavenly Dao still existed, you would undoubtedly be marked for elimination. Sharing the bounty more evenly might be the safer path."

There was a certain logic to this, Zhao Changhe had to admit. But he didn't buy into it.

You just said power is eternal, and now you're trying to sell me on this nonsense? Who do you think you're fooling?

This attempt at shaking his resolve through clever words revealed something: Hidden Wind was not entirely confident in dealing with him. Clearly, Zhao Changhe's earlier battle with the Desolate Calamity had left an impression. Nobody wanted to engage in a life-or-death struggle with such an opponent, especially when another opportunist might be lurking nearby, ready to swoop in.

One decisive strike to settle things, rather than dealing with endless harassment—that's the way to go. Zhao Changhe thought. If he could send this guy packing too, it might buy him a year or more of peace. At the very least, others would think twice before coming after him.

As these thoughts took shape, his peripheral vision caught Hidden Wind raising a hand.

After this prolonged chase, Hidden Wind had finally closed the distance for an effective strike!

Whoosh!

Zhao Changhe barely heard the sound before instinctively ducking low against Snow-Treading Crow's saddle. A razor-sharp wind blade grazed past his head.

The battle had begun!

Chapter 677: A Scarlet Sun Rises, as High as Heaven Itself

The moment Zhao Changhe dodged the wind blade, he was already mentally communicating with Dragon Bird. "Hey, you little brat, how's your recovery coming along?"

Dragon Bird replied irritably, "Almost there... just a little more."

"Damn, you're useless at everything except showing off!"

Dragon Bird roared back in anger, "Do you think River of Stars alone can handle this mess?"

River of Stars: "..."

Zhao Changhe didn't have time to bicker further with Dragon Bird. The next wind blade was already slicing toward Snow-Treading Crow.

While he could dodge, his steed was not nearly as agile. Hidden Wind's earlier fascination with the horse during their conversation had clearly been a setup. It was clear that he was now planning to take down the horse before the rider.

Without hesitation, Zhao Changhe condensed a barrier of vigorous qi to protect Snow-Treading Crow, absorbing the brunt of the attack. At the same time, he leaped off the horse and charged downward.

Snow-Treading Crow, unbothered by sentimentality, immediately changed direction and bolted, showing no inclination to stay behind. Seeing this, Hidden Wind could not suppress a chuckle. "It seems you care deeply for your horse, but the feeling doesn't appear to be mutual."

Zhao Changhe could not be bothered to respond. What the hell does an old corpse like you understand? A horse being practical and knowing when to run was far better than some overly

sentimental nonsense. What, did you expect a sappy “we live or die together” drama? Not even humans are that reliable. Well, I suppose a horse might be, but why demand it?

With Hidden Wind still closing in, Zhao Changhe accelerated his descent and, with a splash, dove into the sea below.

Hidden Wind paused momentarily, surprised. He had not noticed during their prolonged chase that they had already reached the Eastern Sea.

The intention behind Snow-Treading Crow flying southward earlier was simply avoiding the northern battlefield. But this course would lead them to the Cao Gang’s territory, and it was not a suitable place to fight either. After deducing that his pursuer had wind-attribute abilities, Zhao Changhe ultimately decided to head eastward to avoid causing any collateral damage and lead him to the sea. The sea was the perfect battleground to counter his opponent.

Above water, the wind was an advantage; below the waves, it was another story.

Once beneath the waves, Hidden Wind’s capabilities would undoubtedly be diminished.

As Zhao Changhe plunged into the depths, even Hidden Wind felt a hint of admiration. His fame truly isn’t undeserved. His combat instincts are truly remarkable. Though he has only been in the jianghu for just over two years, it seems unthinkable to deem him a novice. He’s much more like a seasoned veteran who’s fought constantly for decades.

But admiration did not mean hesitation. Without delay, Hidden Wind dove in after him.

The underwater environment did hamper his abilities, but that did not mean Zhao Changhe was immune to its effects either. Judging by Zhao Changhe’s earlier battle with the Desolate Calamity, there was no indication he had any affinity with water-based techniques. Killing the Sea Emperor did not necessarily mean he was strong underwater—it was an entirely different matter.

If anything, the underwater environment should be even more disadvantageous to Zhao Changhe than to him. After all, Zhao Changhe had not reached the Profound Control Realm. His understanding of its nuances was still shallow.

If simply diving into the sea could nullify wind-based techniques, what would be the point of calling it the Profound Control Realm?

Thus, to Hidden Wind, Zhao Changhe seemed to simply be leading him to his own grave.

Hidden Wind plunged into the water, showing no signs of being slowed by its resistance. Moving as gracefully as a swimming dragon, he closed the distance behind Zhao Changhe even faster than before.

Zhao Changhe suddenly spun around and slashed backward, unleashing a crescent-shaped blade of energy that cleaved through the water, aimed straight at Hidden Wind's face.

Hidden Wind simply waved his hand, and the blade of energy veered off course, deflected by an unseen force that felt like a breeze brushing past.

Even in the windless depths of the sea, Hidden Wind's every motion embodied the essence of wind. Wind was not just a physical phenomenon; it was the very essence of his mastery, the core of his profound control.

Zhao Changhe let out a silent "hmm" of intrigue. This was something new. Compared to the brute force that Desolate Calamity displayed, Hidden Wind's abilities were much more refined, elegant even. There was something about it that reminded him of Ye Wuzong—perhaps Ye Wuzong had inherited part of this man's legacy?

As their strikes clashed, the surrounding water erupted into streams of bubbles, a natural reaction to the collision of their energies. It seemed like a normal consequence of their clash.

However, Zhao Changhe's eyes narrowed. He suddenly raised his broad saber vertically in front of him as though turning it into a shield.

The seemingly harmless bubbles surged violently, crashing into the saber and erupting in a cascade of deafening explosions.

"Impressive, truly impressive. Such keen instincts!" Hidden Wind's laughter rang out amid the chaos. Unnoticed, a skeletal hand, dry and withered like that of Desolate Calamity, had somehow slipped behind Zhao Changhe and landed lightly on his back.

Zhao Changhe shifted his torso slightly, trying to trap the hand under his arm. But Hidden Wind, as slippery as his namesake, twisted his hand in an eerie, unnatural way, continuing to press toward Zhao Changhe's heart. No matter how Zhao Changhe moved, he could not shake him off.

Meanwhile, the exploding bubbles multiplied, growing stronger and spreading to all sides. Even Dragon Bird was struggling to hold them back.

From every angle, it appeared Zhao Changhe had led himself into a trap. The underwater battleground seemed to be Hidden Wind's domain. Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe's movements were hindered by the surrounding water, making evasion increasingly difficult.

To make matters worse, neither Dragon Bird nor River of Stars was ready to unleash their full power—they were still on cooldown, so to speak, after the battle with the Desolate Calamity. He could not rely on his divine weapons' overwhelming strength this time.

How could he possibly win?

Pch!

Distracted by the relentless explosions, Zhao Changhe finally failed to dodge Hidden Wind's attack. The withered hand pierced cleanly into his side, sending a torrent of blood surging into the water, staining it a vivid red.

Hidden Wind's lips curled into a satisfied smile. But in that very instant, as his hand was lodged in Zhao Changhe's side, unable to withdraw quickly, Zhao Changhe seized his wrist with lightning speed. Letting go of Dragon Bird, Zhao Changhe twisted his upper body with ferocious force, delivering a devastating punch straight at Hidden Wind!

Hidden Wind's smile froze, and his expression twisted in shock.

At this moment, Zhao Changhe was a far cry from his earlier state of struggling against explosions or being hindered by the underwater environment. The punch he delivered was as overwhelming as a tidal wave, fierce and unstoppable. It seamlessly blended the trajectory and characteristics of the surrounding seawater into his own power, making the strike more than twice as potent as it would have been on land.

It embodied the essence of both the Black Tortoise's Fist and the Heavenly Sea-Suppressing Palm—two of the most powerful fist and palm arts, both ranked second in the world—and both were related to water. In the sea, this punch was no different from Xia Longyuan's My Fist on land!

At such close range, with his wrist locked in Zhao Changhe's iron grip, even Hidden Wind's exceptional agility and evasion could not save him. He managed to shift slightly, allowing some of the force to dissipate, but he could not prevent the fist striking him square in the ribs.

Hidden Wind immediately shifted his internal energy to soften the blow, preventing his chest from being shattered outright. Even so, he coughed up a mouthful of blood, his heart shaken.

Now, both of them bore nearly identical injuries, despite Zhao Changhe having relied on pure strength and technique without the aid of any divine artifacts.

"A punch for a punch. It's only polite to return the favor..." Zhao Changhe's eyes glowed blood-red, his twisted smile revealing savage intent. "Now... this is my domain!"

As he spoke, the blood that had spilled in the water—whether from Zhao Changhe himself, Hidden Wind, or the marine life slaughtered by earlier explosions—mixed with the suffocating vicious qi to transform the entire sea into a crimson abyss. The ocean itself became a blood-stained hellscape, filled with boundless vicious qi.

When the ocean turns red, there's no escaping the vicious blood.

Bloodies Mountains and Rivers! Hell on Earth!

Even without his saber, Zhao Changhe's understanding of and mastery over vicious blood had nearly reached the level of the Profound Control Realm.

Now, the relentless explosions turned against Hidden Wind.

As Hidden Wind endured the onslaught, the long-absent River of Stars silently emerged from the seabed, slipping through the sand. With eerie precision, it stabbed into the sole of Hidden Wind's foot.

At the same moment, Zhao Changhe gripped Dragon Bird with both hands and unleashed a devastating downward chop, splitting the sea with the force of his strike.

Hidden Wind, overwhelmed by the combination of pressure from the vicious qi and Zhao Changhe's relentless assault, had no choice but to break away. Ignoring the surrounding vicious blood, he mustered his strength to deflect the slash and retreated in a desperate flight.

He clenched his teeth, thinking with bitterness, I still have so many moves I haven't used, and yet here I am, forced to retreat. Well, I'll be damned.

If this had been a battle on the surface, things would have played out differently. What he had initially perceived as Zhao Changhe digging his own grave by entering the ocean was now revealed to be a meticulously planned trap. From the moment Zhao Changhe chose to dive in, he had manipulated the entire flow of the battle to his advantage.

Splash!

Hidden Wind burst out of the water, soaring into the distance toward the open sea. As long as he stayed above the sea, Zhao Changhe would not dare to approach.

Or so he thought—until he heard the resounding neigh of a horse.

Snow-Treading Crow, seemingly out of nowhere, galloped through the air to his aid. At the same time, Zhao Changhe surged out of the water, leaping onto the horse's back. He lightly kicked the horse's belly and pointed at the fleeing figure.

“Go!”

He's actually chasing me?

Hidden Wind could hardly believe it. For a moment, he wanted to turn back and fight, but when he glanced back, what he saw froze him in place.

The gaping wound in Zhao Changhe's side, which should have incapacitated him, was healing itself, at a speed visible to the naked eye. Within but a mere minute, the only evidence of the injury

left was the tear in his clothing. Beneath it, Zhao Changhe's skin gleamed perfectly unscathed. Not even a scar remained.

Hidden Wind lowered his gaze to his own injuries, feeling as though he had stepped into a nightmare. Just who is the god between us, really? How the hell are you supposed to fight such a man?

"Chase!" Zhao Changhe shouted, spurring Snow-Treading Crow forward. Bow in hand, he nocked an arrow, aiming directly at Hidden Wind.

Panic swept through Hidden Wind as he broke into a cold sweat, fleeing wildly in a serpentine fashion to avoid being hit.

Whoosh!

Unable to resist, Zhao Changhe shot another arrow, the sound cutting through the dawn air.

Dragon Bird exploded with anger. "You missed! Why are you wasting precious arrows?"

Zhao Changhe coughed inwardly. "I just couldn't resist putting the x axis through that sine wave."

Dragon Bird: "Putting the what through the what now?"

Internally rolling his eyes, Zhao Changhe explained, "Look, healing the wound is just a bluff. I'm completely wrecked on the inside. This is all an act to scare him off. If he realizes the truth and turns back, he'll beat us both senseless, and you'll end up having to look for a new master."

Dragon Bird, playing along perfectly, flared with a dramatic crimson glow as if to say, "My ultimate attack is ready!"

In the distance, the sun rose over the horizon, casting golden light across the sea and sky. Dawn brought with it the splendor of day and the lingering brilliance of night, as if the sun and moon shared the heavens. River of Stars shimmered in response, glowing faintly as if resonating with the celestial dance.

Hidden Wind glanced back again, only to find the scene even more overwhelming. His spirit all but shattered at the sight. Without sparing a thought for his worsening injuries, he unleashed every ounce of his remaining power, vanishing without a trace in a desperate bid to escape.

“Pfft...” Zhao Changhe coughed up another mouthful of blood and slumped against Snow-Treading Crow, utterly motionless.

Even his blood-spattered coughs seemed like they were laced with laughter.

After a moment of silence, the blind woman’s voice broke the silence, “Want me to lend you a hand?”

Zhao Changhe, barely holding himself upright, replied weakly, “How?”

“Beg me.”

“Cut the nonsense. If you’re offering, it means you think this is something you should do anyway.”

The blind woman fell silent again. Moments later, a golden light flickered across the sky.

This time, the Tome of Troubled Times displayed a message unlike anything before.

The twelfth month. Zhao Changhe defeated Desolate Calamity at Tancheng, and forced Hidden Wind to retreat into the Eastern Sea. His might shook the heavens, rivaling even Emperor Xia.

Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind—whether ancient demons or ancient gods, both were forced to flee before him!

The arrival of gods and demons marks an era of unprecedented chaos. The Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man shall be reorganized soon.

A scarlet sun rises, as high as heaven itself!

Chapter 678: At the Gates

Zhao Changhe guided Snow-Treading Crow to a small, deserted island, collapsing against a rocky outcrop to rest and swallow medicinal pills.

The golden light in the sky from the Tome of Troubled Times had yet to fade. Zhao Changhe gazed at it with a somewhat peculiar expression on his face.

This time, the Tome of Troubled Times was absurdly biased.

He had emerged from the two battles heavily injured—especially this last one, which had left him barely able to move. He had relied entirely on bluffing to scare off Hidden Wind. Given the current state of both combatants, it could not even be called a “victory.” If Hidden Wind had turned back, Zhao Changhe would have had to rely on Dragon Bird and River of Stars to act on their own to save him.

And yet, the Tome of Troubled Times made no mention of any of this. Instead, it conjured a narrative of him as a fearless hero driving out gods and demons with unparalleled might, even equating him to Xia Longyuan with that ridiculous “rivaling even Emperor Xia” line. It was over-the-top flattery at its finest.

But this was exactly what the blind woman had meant by “helping.” Zhao Changhe wanted to strike decisively and deter others, and this was the only way to do it. Without the tome’s spin, who would believe he had forced gods and demons to flee while remaining seemingly unscathed?

This well-crafted legend could indeed grant him a period of peace. At the very least, those eyeing the Heavenly Tome would think twice before making a move.

On the flip side, the report painted Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind in an extremely unfavorable light. Others would almost certainly start targeting them.

Hidden Wind’s claim of having only himself and owning little else was likely nonsense. If the rules governing secret realms were anything to go by, for him to have survived in some secluded location, he unquestionably had treasures to protect himself. The same could probably be said for Desolate Calamity. Now, they became the ones “guilty” for possessing treasures...

This, Zhao Changhe realized, was why gods and demons preferred to stay hidden. Most were still recovering from their injuries, lacking the confidence to reveal themselves. None of them wanted the Tome of Troubled Times to expose their existence, making them targets. Now that both Hidden

Wind and Desolate Calamity had been publicly outed as wounded, they would face endless trouble in the future.

Why the blind woman was so intent on helping him remained a mystery. As she had said before, even if the Heavenly Tome were stolen from Zhao Changhe entirely, she could simply follow whoever it was that took the Heavenly Tome from him. Whether Zhao Changhe lived or died was not particularly important to her.

Perhaps her true goal was simply to ruin these gods and demons? It was consistent with her previous behavior—always subtly sowing discord.

The most venomous of hearts indeed belongs to a woman.

Of course, leaving aside the biased phrasing, the blind woman also had a valid reason for publishing this announcement.

The Tome of Troubled Times traditionally only reported events that affected the rankings. These ancient gods and demons were not on the rankings, so their victories or defeats would not trigger updates. But the times were changing, and it was no longer appropriate for these beings to remain outside the rankings.

If the gods and demons were part of this world, then the rankings had to adapt to include them.

But the question now was, how were they to be ranked?

In theory, their cultivation levels should place them at the very top of the Ranking of Heaven, potentially claiming the top three positions outright. That would push everyone else down, perhaps even all the way to the Ranking of Earth.

However, cultivation did not always equate to combat power. The Rankings of Troubled Times had always prioritized performance in battle over cultivation levels for precisely this reason. Real-world combat power was the ultimate measure of strength. Without clear victories and defeats, how could anyone judge who was stronger?

Now, with these gods and demons emerging one after another, it was impossible to just estimate their ranking. This was not the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, which accounted for potential. Real battles would be the only way to determine their rightful rankings.

Now that they had “lost” to Zhao Changhe, what would happen next? Zhao Changhe was ranked second on the Ranking of Earth, so would the two Profound Control Realm gods, Desolate Calamity and Hidden Wind, be relegated to the third and fourth rankings? That would be absurd. Even if such a ranking were made, who would be third, and who would be fourth?

It was impossible to decide.

Thus, the only solution was to reorganize or rearrange the rankings at a later date. More gods and demons would need to appear, and there would have to be more battles against others already on the rankings to gather sufficient data for a new order to emerge.

Zhao Changhe gradually pieced together the situation and finally said, “No matter how it’s spun, thanks. This biased announcement is crucial for me. Without it, I couldn’t handle the constant stream of challengers, and I wouldn’t be able to do anything else.”

The blind woman said nothing.

Zhao Changhe added, “You once told me that you only truthfully reflect the facts of the Heavenly Dao and, at most, embellish the phrasing. I believed you. But this time, the embellishment has gone beyond phrasing—it’s deviated from the truth. That suggests it’s not that you lied before but that you’ve now gained some ability to customize the rules. Am I right?”

The blind woman replied, “I still cannot subvert the rules arbitrarily. Rules are rules. I merely continue to manipulate phrasing. In broad terms, you did win. It’s just... a poetic version of the truth.”

“Hmm... journalism,” Zhao Changhe muttered.

“You’ve got time to nitpick my writing, but you’re not worried about the other battle currently going on?”

Zhao Changhe briefly assessed his internal state, then shook his head with some difficulty. “I need to focus on recovering right away. If Hidden Wind comes back, I’m finished. As for the battle over there...”

He paused, a faint smile forming on his lips. "I trust Yangyang."

The blind woman almost gagged.

* * *

Zhao Changhe's battle had stretched from night into day, but in that time, the other battle had progressed at lightning speed.

While Zhao Changhe and the Desolate Calamity were locked in a life-and-death struggle, Wan Dongliu and the Wang Clan's troops had clashed on the road as the former marched to claim the city. The disparity in preparedness between the two sides was stark. The Wang Clan's troops suffered a resounding defeat, and Wan Dongliu's forces pressed on toward Lanling. Before dawn, the city's defending general abandoned his post, and Lanling fell without a fight.

Lanling had been the final defensive barrier south of Langya. Beyond it lay the Wang Clan's very heartland.

Meanwhile, earlier still, Cui Yuanyong had been consolidating the surrendered forces at Juancheng before advancing eastward again. Every town he passed along the way surrendered at the mere sight of his army. By the time the main battle erupted, Cui Yuanyong had already reached Weishan Lake.

Speed was paramount. Neither Cui Yuanyong nor Wan Dongliu had the luxury to slowly reorganize and consolidate their armies. No one knew when the northern barbarian tribes or the Li and Yang clans might intervene with some unexpected maneuver. The consensus was clear: the sooner this campaign concluded, the better. Even a few days' delay could spell disaster.

Thus, while Zhao Changhe hid away to recover, by that same evening, Cui Yuanyong's vanguard had joined forces with Wan Dongliu's troops, and their combined forces began advancing toward Langya.

From the time Cui Yuanyong and Zhao Changhe left Qinghe to now, only a few days had passed. Yet, in those few days, the seemingly formidable forces of the Wang Clan had either surrendered or fled. Their seemingly impenetrable defensive depth had crumbled like rotten wood. Langya, their stronghold, had suddenly become the frontline—a collapse even swifter than that of Yuan Shu[1].

It had all begun with that single arrow across the river, the arrow that completely dismantled anything hitherto considered common sense in warfare.

The advancing forces faced virtually no resistance, turning what should have been a grueling campaign into little more than a forced march. They moved with such speed that it seemed less like a war and more like a tour, advancing straight to the gates of Langya.

Wang Daozhong, now the head of the Wang Clan, was at a loss. Even now, with enemy forces at his doorstep, he could not understand how things had spiraled so completely out of control. His army was vast, his generals many, and he even had the backing of gods and demons. Yet it all seemed as if it did not exist, as if the opposing forces had simply charged straight to his gates.

Still, Langya was different from the surrounding territories. This was the heartland of the Wang Clan, their most solid foundation. Here, they would not collapse at the first touch like the others. Furthermore, it was winter—a season known for favoring defenders. Everyone knew that attacking a fortified city in such conditions was an uphill battle.

“There’s no need to panic,” Wang Daozhong said sternly, addressing his generals in the council hall. “We still have tens of thousands of soldiers in the city. With this cold and snow, water poured on the city walls turns to ice. Who could possibly breach our defenses? Since the deaths of my elder brother and Lord Li in the capital, we’ve established a defensive alliance with other aristocratic families. We only need to hold for a few days—they won’t stand idly by. The Four Idols Cult’s grip on the capital is far from secure. The longer this drags on, the more likely they are to fall into a mess.”

Sitting among the guests, Gui Chen nodded in agreement. “Cui Yuanyong and Wan Dongliu have advanced recklessly. This is no way to conduct a war. Rest assured, my Taiyi Sect will fully support the defense of this city. If we hold out for just a few days, their forces will show fatigue and fall apart without us even needing to engage them.”

Wang Daozhong let out a slow breath. It was clear why the Wang Clan respected Gui Chen so much. His words, coming from someone of such standing on the Ranking of Earth, were a much-needed reassurance in these dire times. Playing along, Wang Daozhong asked, “And Zhao Changhe’s battle with the gods and demons...?”

Gui Chen smiled faintly. “I’m not sure what’s going on with this latest report in the Tome of Troubled Times. But Zhao Changhe, having fought two gods and demons back-to-back, cannot possibly have escaped unscathed. At the very least, we won’t need to worry about him participating

in the short term. Besides... If I'm not mistaken, Mister Daozhong, you've already reached the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, have you not?"

Wang Daozhong had been waiting for this moment. Stroking his beard with a smile, he replied, "Indeed, I was fortunate enough to break through just a few days ago."

"Exactly. Zhao Changhe is likely at a similar level. If he managed to defeat the gods and demons, it must have been by making use of external means—something that worked once but cannot be repeated. Even if he does join the battle, we need not fear him. And if he doesn't, all the better." Gui Chen chuckled. "With just Cui Yuanyong, Wan Dongliu, and Xue Canghai, how could they possibly breach our defenses?"

The interplay of their reassurances seemed to lift the gloom that had filled the council hall. The generals of the Wang Clan, their spirits rekindled, echoed in unison, "If that's the case, let Cui Yuanyong's forces march to their doom!"

Chapter 679: If He Can Do It, so Can I

The first day of the siege was intense and brutal.

Unlike the troops of the capital, who dismissed a winter campaign as a pointless endeavor, the forces of the Cui Clan and the Cao Gang had personal grudges against the Wang Clan, making them willing to fight tooth and nail.

During the months-long siege of Puyang, many of the Cui Clan's troops had fallen before the city walls. How could their comrades not want to avenge them? As for the Cao Gang, their deep-seated loyalty and gang-like solidarity turned their vendetta into a matter of personal honor—after all, their leader had been struck by surprise and left in a vegetative state. A call for vengeance was enough to drive these men of the jianghu into a frenzy.

Adding to the mix were the fanatical Blood God Cult disciples, who seemed willing to trade their lives for a shot at advancing in rank. Together, this motley coalition managed to mount an assault that burned with fervent determination, defying the icy winds and snow.

At the forefront of the attack, Xue Canghai wielded the Blood God Saber with devastating precision. The cult leader himself fought like a berserker, charging forward as though he were a common soldier, fully prepared to die.

Clang!

With a leap that resembled a toad springing from water, he unleashed Scattering the Gods and Buddhas. A defending general in full armor was cleaved in two before his troops' horrified eyes, causing the surrounding soldiers to scatter in terror.

A wielder of the Vicious Blood Saber Art at the level of the Profound Mysteries was essentially a walking disaster on the battlefield. Xue Canghai alone could crack open a massive breach in the city's defenses with ease. Ordinary soldiers were no match for him, paralyzed by the aura of bloodlust he radiated. Only a warrior of similar caliber could stop him.

The Wang Clan knew this well from the prolonged siege of Puyang. As soon as they saw Xue Canghai leading the charge, their guest general Yu Deju, eighteenth on the Ranking of Earth, immediately stepped forward. His long sword struck out with blinding speed, targeting Xue Canghai's vital points.

These two were old adversaries, having clashed repeatedly at Puyang. Each time, Yu Deju had managed to drive Xue Canghai back, forcing him to rely on a formation of Blood God Cult elders to hold the line. But as the attacker this time, Xue Canghai could not rely on his protective formation. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he was forced to retreat from the wall after a short exchange, his momentum broken.

Meanwhile, on another section of the wall, Wan Dongliu faced off silently against Wang Zhaoling. The two carried out seven or eight rapid exchanges, their weapons flashing as spears thrust and parried in deadly precision. Unable to find an opening, Wan Dongliu was forced to retreat, leaping down from the wall, achieving nothing.

Wang Zhaoling, however, was left deeply unsettled.

This Wan Dongliu... He's been hiding his strength really well. He never really looked like much, yet he's actually so strong. If not for the fact that these are our defensive walls, a duel between us might have lasted for hours. How is someone like him so well-hidden?

Boom!

The sound of a battering ram echoed as it slammed into the city gates.

Snapping back to reality, Wang Zhaoling barked out orders. “What are you standing around for? Prepare the rolling stones!”

On the battlefield below, Cui Yuanyong watched the carnage with a somber expression. As the commanding general, he could not afford to personally join the assault. His responsibility was to monitor the overall situation and adapt to any developments.

In this kind of war, the commanding general himself was often the greatest vulnerability.

Cui Yuanyong did not need to look far to know that Wang Daozhong was somewhere nearby, watching him intently, ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness.

He did not know whether Wang Daozhong had truly reached the third layer of Profound Mysteries or if, like his late brother, his breakthrough after absorbing the Sea Emperor’s yin qi left significant flaws, making it more of a pseudo-third layer. But here, without the presence of someone like Xia Chichi or Black Tortoise to exploit those flaws, it did not matter—he was effectively someone who was truly at the third layer.

In the realm of mortal warfare, a figure at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries could single-handedly shift the tide of an entire battle.

As more top-tier experts at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries joined battles in the future, one could not help but wonder if traditional warfare would become entirely obsolete. Zhao Changhe’s arrow across the river was proof enough of this absurdity. Even now, Cui Yuanyong and his allies could not think back to it without shaking their heads in disbelief. A lifetime spent studying military strategy, formations, and logistics—what was the point when an arrow like that could rewrite the rules entirely?

“Cult Leader Xue’s position looks promising...” Cui Yuanyong muttered to himself after observing the battlefield for a moment. “He has a divine artifact he hasn’t used yet. We need to find the right moment for him to use it. Mister Lu...”

Lu Ya, a guest general ranked on the Ranking of Earth, bowed respectfully. “I’m here.”

“Go assist Cult Leader Xue. See if you can create an opportunity for him to deploy his divine artifact and breach the wall. If the members of his Blood God Cult can form their battle formation, the results will be devastating. We’ve seen its effects repeatedly over the past few months.”

“No!” Lu Ya shook his head. “My duty is to protect you, young master.”

Cui Yuanyong smiled. “I am no weakling, Mister Lu. I’m at least at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries and on the Ranking of Man. I’m protected by thousands of troops, how likely is it that something could happen to me? Go.”

Lu Ya hesitated. “Even so, it would be unwise for me to act first. I should be tracking Wang Daozhong’s position—where he goes, I follow. If I leave prematurely, it gives Wang Daozhong too much freedom to strike wherever he chooses. If he targets Wan Dongliu...”

“This is a direct order.”

Lu Ya sighed, reluctantly bowing in acknowledgment. “Yes, young master.”

The moment Lu Ya left, the tension around Cui Yuanyong’s position visibly increased. His personal guards tightened their ranks, surrounding him protectively. The captain of the guard even suggested he dismount his horse, pointing out how conspicuous he was.

Just look at what happened to Cao Boping when he made himself a target, standing on the prow of his ship. Shot dead in full view of everyone.

If Wang Daozhong also decided to shoot an arrow, why would he be unable to replicate that feat? Was there really that much of a difference between Wang Daozhong and Zhao Changhe? Did they not basically possess the same kind of threat?

Meanwhile, on the city wall, Wang Daozhong stood at a high vantage point, gazing out at the enemy’s main formation several miles away. The distance felt eerily similar to that fateful riverbank.

On impulse, he took up his bow and tested his aim. Damn it, I can’t even see the target properly. How in the world did Zhao Changhe manage to do that?

Even imagining how Zhao Changhe pulled the bowstring to send an arrow that far was incomprehensible. He shifted his aim toward the chaos on the wall below, but the battlefield was too disorganized to make out any clear targets. Any shot would likely strike friend and foe alike.

Watching him from the side, Gui Chen raised an eyebrow and asked slyly, “Why not give it a try?”

Wang Daozhong hesitated.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m not shameless. Do you think I’m like Zhao Changhe, utterly devoid of dignity?” Wang Daozhong scoffed, about to lower his bow. But suddenly, he froze, his sharp eyes catching sight of movement within the opposing formation. Lu Ya had left Cui Yuanyong’s side, heading toward Xue Canghai to provide support.

Wang Daozhong was stunned. “Lu Ya dared to leave Cui Yuanyong? Has Cui Yuanyong lost his mind?”

An elder of the Wang Clan standing nearby added urgently, “With Lu Ya occupied with Yu Deju, we should take this chance to crush Wan Dongliu!”

Gui Chen interjected with a sly smile, “Crushing Wan Dongliu? Why not go straight for Cui Yuanyong? Mister Wang, you are currently at the third layer of Profound Mysteries, far stronger than you were at the second layer. The protective formation around Cui Yuanyong is hardly the fortress he imagines it to be. They’re taking a risk, and this... might be the key to our victory!”

Wang Daozhong’s heart stirred. “You’re right... Wan Dongliu is only a diversion. Cui Yuanyong is the true commander. If we take him down, the battle is won!”

The Wang Clan’s generals hesitated instinctively, not because the plan was unsound but because it felt risky for their leader to venture directly into the enemy’s main formation. Yet, on reflection, there seemed to be little real danger. Cui Wenjing was not present, and neither was Zhao Changhe. Cui Yuanyong, who was only at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, could hardly be considered a threat.

The thousands of troops protecting him would be no more than paper tigers to an expert at the third layer.

Perhaps it was time to rethink conventional military strategy—this opportunity was too good to pass up. If Zhao Changhe were to return, things would undoubtedly grow far more complicated.

“If Zhao Changhe can strike at the enemy’s leadership, why can’t I?” Wang Daozhong declared, his mind made up. Seeing no objections from his subordinates, he leaped forward, sword in hand. “Hold the city walls firmly, monitor any movements within the city, and be cautious of any agents of the Demon Suppression Bureau. I will return shortly!”

“Langya has been thoroughly scoured. How could there possibly still be any agents of the Demon Suppression Bureau left here?”

* * *

Near the city’s key storehouses, several figures who had been lurking in the shadows for days raised their heads as they watched Wang Daozhong leave. A glint of determination flashed in their eyes.

Wu Weiyang and his companions, cloaked in the robes of Taiyi Sect disciples, had infiltrated the city from Jiangnan. After days of reconnaissance, they were intimately familiar with its layout.

The moment Wang Daozhong departed, the group sprang into action, moving rapidly toward the granaries.

No one had anticipated that what lay hidden in Langya were not some random remnants of the Demon Suppression Bureau—they were all Ranking of Man experts, four of them at that.

“Stop! What are you—”

The guard’s words barely left his mouth before blades flashed. Heads rolled.

The general overseeing the granaries, a formidable martial artist at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, did not last even a single exchange against the four attackers.

Outside the city, Wang Daozhong flew like an arrow, his sword flashing with deadly light as he charged toward Cui Yuanyong on horseback. “A whelp like you dares to command an army? Unless you’re hiding your father somewhere, no one can save you!”

Clang!

The sound of sword meeting sword rang out, accompanied by a sudden surge of purple qi that filled the battlefield. It swept across the landscape like a tide, brimming with the unmistakable sword intent of Qinghe—if Cui Wenjing went berserk and let out his entire supply of qi in one go to suppress the entire battlefield, even that wouldn't scream "Cui Wenjing is here" louder than this purple qi.

"So you really were hiding your father!" Wang Daozhong spun around in alarm, but what he saw was not the renowned family head of the Cui Clan.

Instead, it was a seemingly insignificant soldier within the ranks, now casting aside their helmet. In one hand gleamed a divine sword, radiating an overwhelming sword qi that rushed forth with unstoppable force.

The youthful face beneath the helmet left Wang Daozhong momentarily stunned.

It was Cui Yuanyang.

Chapter 680: The Fall of Langya

In contrast with Zhao Changhe, Cui Yuanyang was truly the one who played the role of a mere attachment to a divine weapon. In fact, Desolate Calamity's aim was to reduce Zhao Changhe to Cui Yuanyang's level, which would have made him far easier to deal with.

Qinghe Sword's level of power was similar to that of Dragon Bird and the fledgling River of Stars. With Zhao Changhe absent, Cui Yuanyang, at this moment, was essentially a downgraded version of Zhao Changhe.

However, Cui Yuanyang was well aware of her limitations, opting to stay hidden within the army and wield Qinghe as a flying sword, from a distance. Wang Daozhong, lacking Desolate Calamity's abilities, found himself struggling against an autonomous divine sword. Desolate Calamity might have been able to handle fighting a masterless divine weapon, but even the erratic slashes of Qinghe left Wang Daozhong overwhelmed.

Back in the day, Iceheart ran rampant at the Ancient Sword Lake. Even with the combined efforts of Zhao Changhe, Han Wubing, and Xia Chichi, they barely survived its onslaught. A sword without

vulnerabilities, immune to harm and exhaustion, could only be subdued if its energy ran out or if the opponent was vastly stronger—otherwise, victory was unattainable.

If Wang Daozhong had read Records of the Monster Blade[1], he might have anticipated how miserable it was to go up against a weapon with a will of its own.

Under the relentless attacks of such a terrifying divine sword, the guards Wang Daozhong had dismissed as mere fodder suddenly became anything but.

Although Cui Yuanyong was only at the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, he was nonetheless someone on the Ranking of Man. His guards were all battle-hardened veterans. Normally, Wang Daozhong could cut through ten of them with a single swing, but now, with most of his focus taken up by Qinghe Sword, how could they not dare to surround him and attack?

Spears thrust in from all directions. Even Cui Yuanyong leaped from his horse and joined in on the encirclement.

Wang Daozhong hastily summoned a protective barrier of qi to ward off the incoming attacks. While expending his vigorous qi to neutralize the barrage of blades and spears, he focused all his efforts on countering the Qinghe Sword. Step by step, he fought his way backward, attempting to escape the encirclement.

This fight was unwinnable, but retreating was still an option.

Or so he thought.

Just as Wang Daozhong flew backward to escape, a burst of blood-red light erupted from the city walls. Xue Canghai, who had been relentlessly assaulting the walls, suddenly abandoned the siege and turned, his body and saber merging into a deadly strike aimed straight at Wang Daozhong.

At the same time, Lu Ya, who had been engaging Yu Deju, also pivoted and returned to intercept Wang Daozhong.

Clang!

Wang Daozhong blocked Xue Canghai's attack. The force sent Xue Canghai spiraling backward, but it also drove Wang Daozhong back into the enemy formation, where he was immediately pinned down by Lu Ya and Cui Yuanyong.

"Damn it..." Wang Daozhong cursed as he realized his predicament.

On the walls, Yu Deju and the other generals of the Wang Clan were dumbfounded. What now? Were they supposed to jump down to rescue their lord?

Wang Daozhong himself was equally stunned. His forces were the defenders; they could not just open the gates and march out to his aid. Meanwhile, the attackers had the advantage—they could easily return to the siege, leaving Wang Daozhong stranded.

This was precisely why, in years of warfare, even generals famous for their individual prowess, like Timur, Cui Wenjing, and Wang Daoning, had refrained from personally charging into enemy formations to assassinate opposing commanders. Even in battles between the elites on the Ranking of Earth, those like Maitreya hesitated to take such risks, even knowing Tang Wanzhuang had returned to the capital.

There was an unspoken rule, a mutual understanding. Such recklessness was avoided not only because it was dangerous but also because being lured into a trap and dying in such a manner was a disgrace that would tarnish one's name for generations.

And yet, Zhao Changhe had shattered that precedent. His actions had sparked a new wave of boldness—the idea that a decisive strike at the enemy's leader could end the battle in one swift move. If Zhao Changhe could do it, then why couldn't Wang Daozhong?

Except, in spite of Zhao Changhe's repeated claims to the contrary, Wang Daozhong was not he.

And more importantly, he had done it with an arrow.

Now Wang Daozhong found himself neck-deep in trouble, all because he had chosen to emulate Zhao Changhe's gambit in entirely the wrong way.

Of course, the Wang Clan still had formidable elders and capable core members, not to mention powerful guest generals like Gui Chen and Yu Deju. If someone made the decisive call, there was still a chance to send in their top fighters to rescue Wang Daozhong. Alternatively, they could take a

bolder approach. They could open the city gates and launch a full-on assault. Perhaps then they could turn the situation around while their enemy's main formation was in disarray. It was not impossible that such an attack could lead to a decisive victory. The key was making the right decision.

An elder of the Wang Clan stepped forward and shouted decisively, "Their main formation is in chaos! Open the gates and charge out! We'll storm their formation and rescue the family head—that is the best course of action! If we fight effectively, this battle could be decided in one stroke!"

Indeed, risk and opportunity went hand in hand. Wang Daozhong was undeniably formidable, his power capable of suppressing the seas. Even while facing countless experts and a divine sword, he was holding his ground. If the Wang Clan launched a full-scale assault now, there was a chance they could overwhelm the enemy's formation. But time was of the essence. If they delayed any longer, Wang Daozhong would truly fall.

With the elder's decisive command, hesitation within the Wang Clan vanished. The city gates thundered open, and Wang Zhaoling led a cavalry vanguard charging out with ferocity.

On the other side, Wan Dongliu, having already halted his siege, regrouped his forces and turned to intercept, rushing to assist the main formation.

Just as the two sides collided, a sudden blaze erupted from within the city, flames roaring skyward and casting the sky in an eerie red glow.

The Wang Clan forces, just emerging from the city gates, froze in shock.

"What's going on?"

"Hurry! Go back and put out the fire!"

"No, we must save the family head first!"

The experts of the Wang Clan were thrown into chaos, spreading confusion and panic among the soldiers.

The granaries, though not that heavily guarded, were still considered a critical asset. They had several nearly Ranking of Man level officers stationed to defend them. How had they been set ablaze, and so silently at that, without even raising the alarm?

Seeing their precious granaries burning in front of them dealt a heavy blow to morale. If the enemy could torch the granaries right under their noses, what else could they do? And what about their families?

Their families!

Some soldiers, still within the city, immediately abandoned any intention of joining the full-on assault. With shouts of alarm, they rushed toward the granaries or even directly back to their homes. Inside the city walls, chaos erupted, soldiers scattering like headless chickens. The officers tried to stop them but found it impossible to hold them back.

And truth be told, they did not really want to. Some mid-ranking officers threw down their weapons, shed their armor, and rushed home to check on their wives and children.

In reality, Wu Weiyang and his team had no intention of harming the Wang Clan's families. Even the granaries were not completely burned. They had chosen a secondary storehouse to target. Most of the fire was confined to barracks and supply depots, carefully staged to create as much chaos as possible without causing irreversible damage. After all, they planned to use those supplies themselves later.

When Zhao Changhe had first summoned Wu Weiyang to Langya, telling him to "act when the time is right," Wu Weiyang had not expected that moment to come so quickly—not even a month later. But now, looking at the disorder consuming the city, he knew the Wang Clan was finished.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

From the direction of the Wang Clan's ancestral shrine, several figures darted through the air. Even the elders responsible for guarding the shrine, ancient yet powerful, could no longer sit still and had come out to assess the situation themselves.

Wu Weiyang raised his long saber, pointing it toward the flying figures. His voice rang out like a battle cry, "Burning a granary isn't enough for glory! Take the heads of these old dogs and earn glory that will last generations to come!"

The elders, aged and weathered, had likely never expected to be confronted like this. What they faced was not an elite army but a small group of warriors—each one a figure worthy of being on the Ranking of Man!

Aged and weathered as they were, they might not even stand a chance against these attackers.

Where did so many experts come from? Not even the main base of the Demon Suppression Bureau should have so many people at this level.

The city descended into chaos as a fierce street battle broke out. No one paid any attention to the spreading fire, which now burned with even greater ferocity. The area around the city gate was in complete disarray. Soldiers who had not yet exited the gates scattered in all directions, some even trampling over one another in their panic. Those already outside were consumed by thoughts of retreat, utterly demoralized.

Wang Zhaoling, sword in hand, cut down several soldiers in an attempt to rally them, but even that failed to restore order. In the end, the troops that had marched out simply discarded their weapons and surrendered on the spot. “We surrender!”

Even Wan Dongliu stopped and stared at them blankly, what more Wang Zhaoling?

In an instant, the tables had turned. Wang Zhaoling found himself squeezed into the city gate, staring at the advancing enemy forces outside.

Realizing the futility of his position, Wang Zhaoling was not about to make a pointless stand. With a quick leap, he vaulted over the wall and back into the city.

But as he landed, a glimmer of cold steel cut through the air from the city wall above, blocking his retreat.

The attack came from the very wall he had just jumped over. Completely unprepared, Wang Zhaoling instinctively parried the strike, but the force behind it was strange—neither fully solid nor insubstantial. It sent him crashing back down to the ground.

Staring up in shock, his face darkened. “Xuan Chong...”

On the wall above, Xuan Chong smiled faintly. “My apologies, brother Wang.”

Wang Zhaoling turned his head, only to see Wan Dongliu gesturing for his troops to halt their advance. Wan Dongliu also offered a faint smile. “Brother Xuan Chong, it has been years since we last met. Who could have imagined our reunion would look like this?”

Xuan Chong replied with a stern expression. “I find no joy in this situation, none at all.”

Wan Dongliu knew exactly what Xuan Chong meant. Once, they had been a group of young men from prominent families in Yangzhou, drinking together at the same table, egging on a certain couple. Now, though they had risen to become experts of impressive renown on the Ranking of Man, that couple could kick them out to sit with the dogs.

Wang Zhaoling glanced at the two catching up, then shifted his gaze to the distant battlefield where Wang Daozhong was still engaged in a desperate struggle. He sighed heavily.

Gui Chen was still out there.

The clan elders and guest generals who had initially attempted to rescue Wang Daozhong now found themselves in a similar position. However, at least they were not in as much chaos as the ordinary soldiers. After a brief hesitation, they reached a unanimous decision: retreat was no longer an option. They had to press forward and rescue Wang Daozhong. Leaving their strongest leader to die was unthinkable—if he fell, it was the end for the Wang Clan.

Even if the battle was hopeless, saving Wang Daozhong meant they could regroup and flee to the sea, biding their time for a resurgence. Without him, there would be no hope of rebuilding.

Resolving themselves, they charged en masse toward the enemy’s main formation.

At the forefront was Yu Deju, ranked eighteenth on the Ranking of Earth. He was the first to enter the fray—only to be met with the ferocious Blood God Saber and a formation made up of elders of the Blood God Cult.

Xue Canghai’s face twisted into a sinister grin. “Old Yu, care for another round?”

Yu Deju wasn't intimidated in the slightest. His sword thrust straight into the formation as he thought to himself, I'm not alone. Gui Chen isn't any weaker than I am. With the two of us who are on the Ranking of Earth here, how could they stop us?

But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than a sharp sense of danger seized him.

Instinctively, Yu Deju dodged to the side, narrowly avoiding a flexible sword that grazed past him. Yet, in a seamless, flowing motion, the blade curved and found its target, piercing into his side.

Yu Deju turned in disbelief, his eyes locking onto Gui Chen's calm, smiling face. "Mister Yu, those who surrender will not be harmed."

"Gui Chen!" The other elders of the Wang Clan arrived just in time to witness the betrayal. Staring at the unfolding scene, their minds went blank, their reflexes dulled. Even their attempts to act felt disjointed and meaningless.

One of their strongest allies had turned, and another lay injured. Against an enemy force with tens of thousands of troops, what chance did a handful of old bones have?

Meanwhile, Wang Daozhong, trapped and struggling to fend off the onslaught, roared in fury, "Gui Chen! The Wang Clan has treated you with nothing but generosity!"

Gui Chen replied with a faint smile. "That's true. But unfortunately, I made an agreement a long time ago, long before this, with King Zhao."

King Zhao...

The words hit like a thunderclap.

The Wang Clan had conducted thorough investigations into the Taiyi Sect, ensuring they had no connections to the Demon Suppression Bureau. After all, in a court as dysfunctional as the current dynasty, where only Tang Wanzhuang seemed to take her responsibilities seriously, there was no need to fear Gui Chen being an agent of the bureau. Convinced of this, the Wang Clan had gradually grown at ease with him.

They had assumed Gui Chen's betrayal was a spur-of-the-moment decision, a reaction to the Wang Clan's apparent decline. But now they realized that this was all part of Zhao Changhe's meticulous planning. It was something orchestrated, as Gui Chen himself had admitted, a long time ago.

The fires within the city? Undoubtedly orchestrated by his people as well.

Who would have thought it possible? The so-called mountain bandit of Beimang actually had schemes that reached this far and struck this deeply.

The Wang Clan had lost, not just to an army but to a vision.

And they could not even say it was undeserved.