

Mythical 34

Chapter 34: Dong Zhuo and Li Ru

In his state of confident arrogance, Lu Bu was unmatched, able to sweep across the land on his own. But once Lu Bu began to doubt his own abilities, his strength would start to wane, and as his power diminished, his self-doubt would deepen, leading him into a second vicious cycle.

Zhao Yun had won the bet. Strong self-confidence brought immense strength, but once confidence faltered, it would naturally drain away all power.

Lu Bu fell into this second vicious cycle. His flawless confidence cracked, and he could no longer stop the downward spiral.

Frantic, angry, and irritable, he swung his halberd in fury against Zhao Yun and Guan Yu, but his efforts became increasingly ineffectual. Meanwhile, Zhao Yun and Guan Yu's coordination grew ever more seamless—Zhao Yun countered Lu Bu's attacks, while Guan Yu gathered momentum, each strike tracing a perfect arc.

"Clang!" A loud clash rang out as Lu Bu finally felt his once boundless inner energy beginning to deplete. For the first time, he felt the weight of the halberd in his hands.

"I am Lu Bu!" Lu Bu roared, his eyes bloodshot as he swung at the two men, entirely disregarding the massive openings in his defense.

"Die!" Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade traced a large circle, the tip colliding with Lu Bu's halberd.

Zhao Yun made no comment on Guan Yu's actions but did not slow his own movements.

"Chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp~" A series of bird calls, and Zhao Yun's entire being became enveloped in flames, a massive flaming phoenix appearing on the battlefield, its wings spread wide.

"Boom!" The phoenix flapped its wings, a trail of fire arcing across the battlefield, engulfing all of Lu Bu's escape routes. This was Zhao Yun's strongest move, Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix, where a hundred strikes converged into one. The combined power of one hundred moves was channeled into the final thrust. Although the legend exaggerated this technique's strength, Zhao Yun knew his version could deliver twelve to fifteen times the power of a normal strike—more than enough.

Lu Bu looked disheveled, but he was still alive. His armor had been nearly shattered—not by the phoenix's beak but by its feathers. The Red Hare, a steed worthy of its reputation, had dodged the most powerful strike at the last moment. If not for that, Lu Bu would have been gravely injured. The wall behind him now bore a large, bowl-sized hole, the surface smooth as a mirror.

Silently catching his breath, Zhao Yun saw Lu Bu's flickering eyes after the dust settled and immediately launched another Hundred Birds Facing the Phoenix. A phantom of the phoenix began to form, and Lu Bu, sensing the imminent threat, turned his horse and fled. He knew that continuing the fight would likely be fatal.

"Charge!" As soon as Lu Bu turned to flee, Liu Bei spurred his horse forward. He remembered Chen Xi's words: during the campaign against Dong Zhuo, he should seize every opportunity to stand out and build his reputation.

"Charge!" Liu Bei's move startled everyone, but they quickly reacted. They couldn't let Liu Bei take all the glory; after all, he was a member of the Han royal family! Zhao Yun silently advanced with his spear towards Hulao Pass, while Guan Yu, dragging the half-dead Zhang Fei (who had regained consciousness, albeit covered in blood), also charged towards the pass, shouting, "Dong Zhuo is on the pass! Kill Dong Zhuo, and the world will be at peace!"

Dong Zhuo, panicked, turned to flee but was stopped by Li Ru.

In Li Ru's view, no matter how fierce a single general was, they were no match for a formation of soldiers. Once the battle formations were in place, the combined force would be overwhelming. Any lone general charging in would face certain death! Dong Zhuo's face turned dark. The previous battle had terrified him. Since raising his army in Xiliang, he had never witnessed such a brutal fight. If an enemy reached the pass, they would undoubtedly target him directly, and he doubted they could be stopped. This thought made Dong Zhuo's face pale as he shoved the scholarly Li Ru aside and fled down the pass without looking back.

Li Ru was stunned, watching Dong Zhuo's trembling retreat with a sense of desolation. When had he, Li Ru, fallen to such a state?

Boulders and logs were continuously hurled down from Hulao Pass, halting the allied forces' advance. For top-tier warriors like Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, over a hundred skilled archers targeted them with arrows every time they made a move.

Guan Yu attempted a charge but was met with over a hundred arrows aimed at every part of his body. Despite his skill, he couldn't deflect them all with his blade. Using his inner energy to block the remaining arrows for a moment, he was still struck in the left arm by a concealed arrow. Frustrated, he retreated.

The battle ended just like that. Li Ru wasn't foolish and never relied solely on generals for his safety. He preferred using his own strategies to manage everything.

With the allied forces repelled, cheers erupted from the top of Hulao Pass. Li Ru had indeed done well in managing the Xiliang soldiers he had brought with him.

This was why the Xiliang soldiers were so fearless; being a soldier meant a full belly, and Li Ru ensured this. No one dared to withhold soldiers' pay under his watch. He knew better than anyone that in times of chaos, strength was everything, and everything else could be obtained through strength.

Li Ru slumped against the stone slabs of Hulao Pass, showing none of the scholarly elegance he once displayed. He had never been so unconcerned with appearances before, but now he was exhausted. He had grown weary the moment Dong Zhuo shoved him aside and fled.

"Strategist!" Gao Shun called, clasping his hands in salute. "The allied forces have retreated."

"Leave me alone for a moment, Gongzheng," Li Ru replied, his face dark. Gao Shun stood behind him, unmoving.

After a long while, Li Ru looked up at Gao Shun. "You are the lieutenant I admire most under Lu Bu. Do you think we will lose?"

"The danger of Hulao, the wealth of Luoyang, the elite of our army—the allied forces will surely be defeated," Gao Shun declared firmly.

"Defeated, huh?" A bitter smile appeared on Li Ru's face. "Yes, they will surely be defeated. Gongzheng, make sure you hold this place."

Li Ru got up and walked unsteadily down from Hulao Pass. For some reason, Gao Shun felt a sense of desolation, as if witnessing a hero in decline, while watching Li Ru's retreating figure.

Li Ru made his way to the administrative hall within Hulao Pass, where he could hear Dong Zhuo's angry roars and Lu Bu's defensive explanations. He felt incredibly tired, weary to the core.

Entering the hall, Li Ru saw that except for one, all the officers who had come to Hulao were seated in their respective positions. Li Ru calmly took the chief seat to the left, noticing that the spot behind him was occupied by Li Su instead of the plump, affluent Jia Xu.

[Returning to Chang'an, probably without even going back to Luoyang. Indeed, his grasp on human nature surpasses mine. Dong Zhuo... alas...] Li Ru sighed inwardly, having lost most of his hope in Dong Zhuo.