

T. Times 561

Chapter 561: Battle of Sea and Land

Lady Three kept a calm expression but her teeth clenched slightly.

This guy knows far too much. The problem isn't just that there are undercover Sea Tribe members among Lai Qi's men, it's that the Sea Emperor seems to have directly passed on information to him. Only the Sea Emperor's most trusted would have access to all this information, right? Most importantly, he knows I'm Black Tortoise!

Who cares if Zhao Changhe's reputation as a womanizer has spread across the seas? Everyone knows how incorrigible he is, so who cares? But if word gets out that Black Tortoise and her little pig were holed up in a ship's cabin for days, I can't even imagine how the world would react—let alone how Tang Wanzhuang and the others would respond.

And then there's Vermillion Bird, and Chichi...

If word spread that both of them had also been caught in some scandal with the same pig, what would the world think of that?

The Four Idols Cult isn't some... joke!

A surge of anger overcame her. Ignoring the fact that her injuries had not fully healed, Lady Three pulled a snake-like whip from her ring, lashing out at the water figure in a furious rage. "Just die already!"

The water figure looked bewildered at her sudden outburst. "?"

As expected, water constructs could not understand human emotions.

It's clearly someone else who provoked her, yet now she's venting on me—what for?

Zhao Changhe turned his head to see Lady Three engaged in fierce combat with the water figure. He raised his saber but found himself at a loss for words, his fighting spirit somewhat deflated by the whole exchange. It was as though Lady Three had drained the fighting spirit out of him.

He glanced at Hai Changkong, who was watching Lady Three fight with a faint, amused expression. Zhao Changhe spoke, his voice flat. “The way you’re acting as if you have everything under control is really getting on my nerves.”

Hai Changkong shifted his gaze back to Zhao Changhe, smiling slightly. “Then why don’t you show me otherwise, King of Man?”

Zhao Changhe raised his saber and, in the next instant, suddenly plunged it downward, piercing the ship’s hull. Seawater rushed in, and the ship began to sway violently.

The water figure roared in fury, “You scoundrel!”

Whoosh!

Lady Three’s whip lashed out, wrapping around the water figure and completely containing its attempt to retaliate against Zhao Changhe, not a single strike getting through.

“You—” Hai Changkong’s expression changed, his gaze turning serious as he looked at Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe smiled. “After watching for a while, I might not know everything, but I’ve figured out one thing—you can’t trust a word the marshal says. No one knows which of his statements are true, and which are lies. Like that bit about the array sinking into the sea making things worse... I just don’t buy it.”

The ship creaked and groaned as it began to sink rapidly. Hai Changkong’s face darkened. “Why?”

Zhao Changhe said, “It’s simple. If sinking the array into the water would make it more powerful, that dim-witted water figure wouldn’t be here trying to protect it. The fact that it’s guarding it suggests that the array loses its power underwater. Its runes need to be carved into something solid, and water isn’t exactly that. If I’m right, it also can’t be placed on solid ground, which is why it’s not on the island. It needs to be suspended on wood, afloat on water—that’s the best setup.”

Hah, my little pig is clever as always! Lady Three immediately realized the perfect sense in Zhao Changhe's analysis. Her anger turned into joy, and with a crash, she smashed through the cabin wall, darting away. "Hey, water boy! Come fight me on land!"

Zhao Changhe, understanding her intentions as if by instinct, moved at the same moment. He crashed through the cabin wall and made his escape. The water figure, enraged and newly freed from the whip, swung at him but did not even graze a strand of hair. Instead, it obliterated another part of the ship.

As the ship began to sink, the water figure turned furiously to Hai Changkong. "Why didn't you stop them? Is talking all you're good for now?"

Hai Changkong sighed. "I couldn't find any openings—neither in his spirit nor in his demeanor."

The water figure fell silent.

At their level, a battle was no longer just about swinging blades. Oftentimes, the conversation itself was a part of probing for weaknesses and undermining the opponent's morale. Hai Changkong's confidence, his sense of having everything under control, had been completely shattered by Zhao Changhe's seemingly casual move.

It was not Hai Changkong's fault either. Zhao Changhe's astuteness and decisiveness had even surpassed the water figure's expectations.

"What's done is done. Let it sink." Hai Changkong did not seem too troubled. "No plan ever goes perfectly. We have to accept the unexpected. The Sea God has already gained a considerable amount of the faith it needs. This outcome is acceptable."

The water figure cut him off angrily. "But it's the Sea Tribe that's suffered the most losses! If it weren't for our members leading the charge, how could these nations' fleets have been thrown into chaos? Now, most of our vanguard is dead, and we haven't even begun to reap the real rewards before everything's become such a huge mess!"

"What's the point of yelling at me?" Hai Changkong replied coolly. "Did you really think I could take them on alone? Now that you're free from the array core, let's join forces and take them down. Once we've dealt with them, we can restore the sacrificial array. I'll order our men to switch from killing to capturing. Sacrificing prisoners alive will serve just as well."

With this fallback plan in place, the water figure calmed down and said no more, rushing off in pursuit.

Not far away, on the shore of Dongan Island, Zhao Changhe and Lady Three stood side by side, watching coldly as it approached. Switching from killing to capturing seemed like the most direct consequence of disrupting the array... If they could kill the water figure here, would that not conclude this battle perfectly?

There were still Penglai soldiers watching them from afar, but none dared approach.

Many veteran soldiers kept their units in check, looking at Lady Three with expressions of complexity that no outsider could understand. Yet, in the end, none of them spoke a word.

Lady Three looked back briefly and spoke just one sentence, "Have everyone retreat."

Boom!

Before she even finished speaking, a massive wave surged forth. The water figure, now unleashing its full power, appeared on a completely different level compared to when they were merely engaged in a skirmish earlier.

It cared nothing for the lives of the soldiers here.

Without even looking back, Lady Three threw a punch. The giant wave reversed course, and a nearby lifeboat, caught between her punch and the waves, was instantly reduced to splinters.

Boom!

The wave crashed onto the shore, sending a chaotic explosion of water and shattered wood flying everywhere.

The Penglai soldiers on the shore quickly retreated to the center of the island.

If Lady Three and the water figure fought without restraint, no one nearby would survive. Such was the might of those at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, the might of those at the very peak of power in this era—power bordering the divine.

“She’s already far stronger than her mother ever was...”

“Even His Majesty at his peak wasn’t this strong.”

“And now?”

“No one knows. They’re beyond our understanding...” one of the old generals murmured. “What I really want to see is how Marshal Hai fares against the one ranked first on the Ranking of Man.”

That was a level that ordinary people could still aspire to reach.

Almost all the veterans of Penglai dreamed of returning to see their homeland, to see how they now compared to the martial artists of the Great Xia.

Sure, they all said they did not want everything they did to be recorded in the Tome of Troubled Times... but on the other hand, what martial artist wanted to sail the seas all their life, weathering countless storms and battles, only to remain unknown and unacknowledged?

Penglai had even attempted an official maritime version of the Tome of Troubled Times, but how could it possibly compare to the divine prestige of an actual page from the Heavenly Tome? In the end, it felt empty, and it became a joke that no one paid any attention to.

Whatever anyone thought of Hai Changkong, whatever schemes lay behind this battle or what would come after—none of that mattered to anyone right now.

Hai Changkong was essentially Penglai’s strongest, aside from Dragon King Hai Pinglan. Everyone wanted to know—could he defeat the number one in the Ranking of Man, who represented the pinnacle of mortal martial arts in the Central Plains, and prove that the heroes of the sea were not inferior to those of the land?

Hai Changkong soared high into the air like a goshawk, his long saber flashing like a rainbow as he slashed at Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe stood still; only his wrist flicked as he drew Dragon Bird, striking Hai Changkong's saber with perfect timing.

Clang!

As their weapons collided, massive columns of seawater erupted from beneath Hai Changkong, spiraling upward.

As the water reached high in the sky, it suddenly sparked with lightning, thunder cracking as rain poured down.

This was not some special technique belonging to Hai Changkong. It was simply the result of their clash, stirring up the surrounding wind and sea, colliding and altering the weather itself.

Everyone watching from afar was left dumbfounded.

They had thought Lady Three's battle was a fight between gods, and this was a fight between men.

But now, they realized that neither of these two was comparable to ordinary mortals either!

Further out at sea, Hai Qianfan and Hua Zhenming leaped over countless warships, rushing toward the island. No one could stop them.

Maybe they felt an intense desire to join in, drawn by the peak battle happening here. Or maybe they were worried for Lady Three and had come to lend their support.

Zhao Changhe and Hai Changkong seemed to sense them at the same time. They glanced in their direction, then looked back at each other, both smiling.

Hai Changkong said, "Shall we conclude this battle before they arrive?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "Then I'll only use three moves."

Chapter 562: The Three-Move Promise

Hai Changkong was not fazed by what seemed like a dismissive comment. He had already learned, over twenty years ago, not to be provoked by his opponent's provocations.

He understood perfectly well that Zhao Changhe was trying to provoke him—after all, Zhao Changhe was known for his deep knowledge of the human body and vicious qi. It was quite likely that anger and the energy that stemmed from it were things that Zhao Changhe could easily exploit.

In a world of cultivation, raw youth was not always an advantage. With powerful cultivation techniques, one's physical capabilities could be maintained for a long time, extending a martial artist's prime far beyond normal limits. In fact, cultivating internal energy required years of accumulation, along with vast combat experience and the refinement of techniques—things younger fighters often lacked. Hence, the existence of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons.

Excluding anomalies like Xia Longyuan, who had entered the Profound Control Realm, most people believed the true peak of a martial artist's strength was in their thirties or forties. By then, their internal energy was fully developed, their combat experience extensive, and their skills honed to perfection, while the body had not yet begun to decline. For those with profound cultivation, this peak could extend into their fifties or sixties.

But eventually, time caught up with everyone. No matter how high one's internal cultivation was, the body's natural decline was inevitable. Without reaching the Profound Control Realm, one would remain within the bounds of mortality, never touching the bounds of the divine.

Most of those ranked on the Ranking of Heaven were in their forties, as this was considered their golden age. People like the Grand Shaman Bo'e, Yuxu, and Ye Wuzhong were already considered old. If they could not break through to the Profound Control Realm, they would soon decline. Of course, an old tiger is still a tiger nonetheless, and their decline was imperceptible to most. It would only show when fighting opponents of the same caliber, where they might feel that hint of fatigue.

Hai Changkong, now forty-seven or forty-eight, was precisely at that golden age. He knew that in the coming years, he might begin to decline as he could no longer see any possibility for further progress. There was no escaping the inevitability of aging.

He was eager to see where he truly stood during this period when he was at the absolute peak of his power.

His long saber sliced through the mist, aiming for Zhao Changhe's throat. To the onlookers, it resembled an osprey skimming over the water, the arc of the saber both elegant and profound.

The seemingly heavy Dragon Bird rose gracefully, meeting the attack like a swordfish provoked by that osprey.

It was clearly a clash between two blades, but it looked more like a painting.

Their understanding of martial arts had reached the point where they had truly merged with nature itself, setting them apart from others still focused on refining their own skills. Most could not even comprehend the power exchange between the two strikes. All they could see was the elegance of the clash, failing to discern its underlying intricacies.

Those with a keener eye could tell that Hai Changkong's strike was so elusive that most people would not even be able to track its trajectory, let alone block it. And yet, to Zhao Changhe, it seemed as if he had rehearsed this exact move countless times. He seemed to know exactly where and when the strike would be strongest, and countered just before Hai Changkong could unleash his full might.

In terms of technique, they were at the pinnacle. Neither could gain an edge through skill alone, and the battle would ultimately come down to a clash of raw power. In the end, there was no substitute for true might.

When the two blades met, there was a deep, resonant sound—like a mallet striking a drum, rolling like thunder. It was far from the sharp clang one would expect from metal meeting metal.

One of the onlookers who understood the nuances spoke up. "Both of them are channeling energy that mimics the crushing might of the deep sea. Anyone else would be crushed under such force. The moment an opponent's strength makes contact, it is dispersed layer by layer and rendered ineffective. And since both of them are using the same technique, the result is this dull, thunderous sound."

"So how should we counter this move if we face it?"

"...Are you asking me? I'd probably just stick my neck out and hope for a quick death."

As the crowd discussed, the two fighters moved into their second exchange.

“Thanks for the commentary.” Zhao Changhe laughed. “Want to explain this next move?”

No one quite knew how he managed to break free from their deadlock. Since both were using techniques that mimicked the nature of the deep sea, their true qi had been intertwined like two converging oceans, making separation no easy task. Yet, while Hai Changkong found himself unable to disengage, Zhao Changhe’s saber moved smoothly, sliding along the edge of Hai Changkong’s weapon.

It was nothing complicated. Zhao Changhe had simply used the brute strength of his Blood Asura Body to tear apart the entanglement.

To the onlookers, it was as if the sea had vanished, along with the sky and the island.

All that remained was an endless expanse of blood. All that was left was a stifling, oppressive force that made even those watching from afar feel madness creeping into their minds.

It was unimaginable to them what Hai Changkong, facing this strike directly, was feeling.

A flash of the saber sliced through the blood-red expanse—no sky, no earth, no self.

No Man’s Land, Hell on Earth!

Two moves fused into one, but it was clearly just one strike!

Clang!

Cold sweat drenched Hai Changkong’s back as he parried with his blade, retreating several zhang.

For a moment, his mind had gone completely blank. Zhao Changhe’s No Man’s Land carried a sudden, almost hypnotic power, temporarily clouding the opponent’s perception by stirring their vicious qi. It was an incredibly difficult move to guard against in the heat of battle. Fortunately, Hai Changkong, having faced the Sea Emperor’s whispers and mental manipulations regularly, was somewhat accustomed to such interference. Otherwise, that strike could have easily been fatal.

One of Zhao Changhe's previous victories included defeating a higher-ranked assassin called Frost Hawk from Snow-Listening Pavilion. Frost Hawk had been similarly caught off guard and instantly defeated because of this very move.

Though Hai Changkong's lapse lasted only a fleeting moment, it was enough to leave him slightly unsteady. His blood and qi fluctuated, forcing him to quickly pull back to create distance, staying focused as he prepared for Zhao Changhe's third move.

All those watching held their breath, wondering if it really would all come down to this third move.

Even the water figure, who was still battling Lady Three, could not help but take note. Though Hai Changkong was at a disadvantage, his level of skill was still extremely high. The idea of Zhao Changhe ending it all with one decisive blow seemed far-fetched. What could his third move possibly be?

In the next instant, blood-red light surged again. Zhao Changhe's eyes glowed red as he leaped lightly into the air and brought his saber down!

However, his saber was not aimed toward Hai Changkong but the water figure!

The crescent-shaped saber energy, usually a sweeping horizontal arc, had turned into a vertical strike, instantly closing in on the crystal core at the back of the water figure's head.

Hai Changkong, who had been retreating cautiously: “?”

The water figure: “???”

This was a twist that even Hai Changkong had not anticipated, let alone anyone else.

The water figure was focused on Lady Three, only to be struck out of nowhere by this combination attack, designed to scatter gods and crush armies. It barely had time to react, instinctively trying to shift into a fluid form to dodge. But Lady Three was not about to let that happen. She switched out her whip for her fist, viciously striking the crystal core with all her strength.

Boom!

Water splashed in every direction as Lady Three's mouth dripped with blood, but the water figure had been shattered—reduced to scattered droplets, struggling to slowly reform.

Anyone who had fought this creature before knew that in this state, it was badly injured. It was the same condition as the water figure from before had been in just before fleeing and merging with the giant octopus.

But this time, the water figure in front of them did not flee. Instead, its furious voice echoed through the air, "Zhao Changhe... Where is your honor as a martial artist?"

Zhao Changhe swung Dragon Bird in an upward arc, narrowly deflecting Hai Changkong's incoming strike.

Suddenly switching targets mid-battle left Zhao Changhe full of openings, which Hai Changkong was quick to exploit, forcing him into a difficult defensive position. Yet, hearing the water figure's words, Zhao Changhe could not help but laugh aloud. "We're not even being recorded by the Tome of Troubled Times right now, so who would I even be trying to impress? Talking about a martial artist's honor... It's too bad that I don't have a brick, or I'd just chuck it at your face."

The onlookers were left stunned, their mouths agape.

Zhao Changhe retreated step by step under Hai Changkong's fierce attacks, still smiling as he spoke, "I've never fought you before. I'm not that familiar with his style of martial arts or his techniques, so how could I possibly be confident in beating you in three moves? You heroes of the sea like to think of yourselves as rational, but do you really think every man from the Central Plains is just arrogant?"

Hai Changkong spoke in a low voice, "So when you said three moves, it was all for that one strike?"

"Of course. When I claimed three moves, even if you didn't feel provoked, there would still be a subconscious expectation that I would take the initiative and be aggressive. The first move was an attack against your attack. The second move was even more aggressive, reinforcing that perception. By the third move, you would inevitably adopt a more cautious strategy, and even the water figure would be thinking about how I might try to strike you. Isn't that when the opportunity arises?"

From the start, Zhao Changhe never intended to defeat Hai Changkong. Why would he care about proving himself on the Rankings of Troubled Times right now? Was this a formal duel with prize money on the line?

Lady Three's injuries had yet to fully heal. Originally, she had a slight edge over the water figure, but she could not last in a prolonged fight. No matter how you looked at it, the most practical strategy was helping her finish off the water figure.

Hai Changkong's expression remained unchanged. "Quite clever. But have you considered that, a moment ago, you had me on the defensive? If you had continued pressing the attack, I may have been defeated. Now that you've left yourself open and I've gained the upper hand... the one who dies might as well be you."

Zhao Changhe grinned, revealing his teeth. "But I have a backup plan."

As he spoke, a roar erupted from behind Hai Changkong. "Traitor, face your death!"

Whoosh!

A blade nearly identical to Hai Changkong's came slashing down toward the back of his neck.

At the same time, Hua Zhenming arrived, his sword aimed at Hai Changkong's lower back.

Zhao Changhe's backup had arrived.

Is this the end of the battle?

To the shock of everyone watching, Zhao Changhe intercepted Hai Changkong's saber with his own, but his left hand abruptly drew a sword and pointed it to his side.

Clang!

His sword met Hai Qianfan's saber.

What had seemed like an attack on Hai Changkong's neck had turned mid-strike, angling toward Zhao Changhe's waist.

But Zhao Changhe had anticipated it all along! The sword in his left hand met the sudden strike, parrying it perfectly.

The sharp sword qi pierced through, cutting through the powerful force of Hai Qianfan's strike and running along his meridians, momentarily stopping him from launching another attack.

Zhao Changhe then smoothly redirected his sword, redirecting it to meet Hua Zhenming's slightly slower strike.

At that moment, the three-pronged attack was entirely neutralized.

Boom!

Lady Three's powerful punch had already struck Hai Qianfan in the face, her voice cold as she said, "Uncle Hai... I kept trying to find a reason for you, but in the end... you've left me disappointed. Deeply disappointed..."

The onlookers were struggling to process what had just happened.

So, all along, this is what Zhao Changhe meant by finishing it in three moves.

If they hadn't eliminated the water figure before the others arrived, would they have been able to remain standing now?

Chapter 563: The Dissipating Fog

From the start, this battle had been too perplexing, leaving room for speculation in all directions, each with its own valid support.

For years, the pirate crew had kept the position of third leader vacant, waiting for Lady Three's return. Hai Qianfan had always referred to himself as the acting leader and relinquished control the moment Lady Three came back without even a hint of a power struggle. If he truly wanted to lead

the pirates, it would have been easy—Lady Three would not have even competed for it. Was there really a need for all this pretense?

Moreover, over the years, the pirate crew had gone through numerous internal shifts. The newcomers had always been taught that there was a third leader out there, and that they must follow her upon her return. It was not something that could be faked—the attitudes of the pirates were apparent at first glance.

In recent years, the pirates had been diligently engaged in trade with the Four Idols Cult, working hard and honestly. Even when it came to taking a cut of the profits, the amount they kept for themselves was surprisingly modest. When Lady Three realized that the power of faith was accelerating the Sea Emperor's revival, she instructed them to dissuade the Great Xia Empire's fishermen and merchants from heading out to sea, and they carried it out without hesitation, following her orders to the letter.

In every way, they seemed like loyal subordinates.

Most importantly, during the night raid by the Sea Tribe, it had been a real fight. The pirates had suffered significant casualties, and the Sea Tribe's elite forces had taken heavy losses—powerful sharkmen and the water figure, all destroyed in that battle. Ordinary fishermen lay dead in heaps, filling the sea with with corpses.

Could that have all really been an act?

If this was all a ploy to trap Lady Three, then they did a terrible job. They failed to lure her into any traps, and her battle against the water figure was as straightforward as could be.

And now, when it looks like the pirates and Penglai had joined forces to attack the smaller nations' fleets, it suddenly turns out to be part of some sacrificial plan for the Sea Emperor?

It's just all too bizarre. Is there more to the story?

Perhaps due to the common origin that the two factions have, they've been secretly planning something against the hegemon of the sea. But then, the pirates might not have known about the sacrifices at all. Also, if this alliance had been in the works for a long time, it had little to nothing to do with Lady Three.

But at the end of the day, it doesn't seem all that unreasonable for Penglai and the pirates to have been on the same side from the beginning, staging everything to deceive the Sea Emperor.

Should we trust Hai Qianfan then?

As Zhao Changhe secretly shared his thoughts with Lady Three, she found herself unable to make up her mind. She ultimately replied with the same sentiment she did before, "I'll listen to you."

As long as she was willing to follow his lead, Zhao Changhe was content. Shelly's charm lay in the fact that, when her mind was stuck, she was willing to hand over the decision-making to someone else rather than stubbornly insisting on her own way.

And once the decision was Zhao Changhe's to make, he was not one to be swayed by sentiment—he had no ties with the pirates. All he needed was a simple test. Even while being pushed into a difficult spot by Hai Changkong, Zhao Changhe had not used his sword or saber. He purposely left himself open, like he was a step away from being overwhelmed, waiting for the bait to be taken.

And sure enough, the bait was taken.

Hai Qianfan, now in his fifties, had once been the captain of Hai Pinglan's guard. He was a few years older than the younger Hai Changkong. With his rugged face and graying beard, he cut a figure that looked steadfast and honorable.

Now, facing Lady Three's furious punch, Hai Qianfan took a slight step back, his saber slicing in a diagonal arc. "Princess, you still haven't fully recovered from your injuries, and you've even just exhausted yourself dealing with the water figure. You've injured yourself yet again... It really isn't good to push yourself so hard."

Bang!

Her fist crashed against his saber, and both were forced back several paces. Lady Three clutched her still-unhealed rib injury, her expression icy cold.

Hai Qianfan did not emerge unscathed either. With the difference in their strength, her punch—even while injured—had shaken him to his core, almost making him cough up blood.

He took a deep breath, looking over to where Zhao Changhe was fending off Hai Changkong and Hua Zhenming, swords flashing. Slowly, he spoke, “Young Master Zhao, this kind of test was risky. One wrong move, and you’d have been wounded by Hai Changkong. You must have already suspected me of being an enemy to take such a risk to force me to reveal myself. May I ask for your reasoning? I’d like to know where I slipped up. Was it just because of this naval battle? The reason behind this fight isn’t what the two of you think.”

Lady Three glanced at Zhao Changhe, curious to hear his reasoning as well.

Zhao Changhe parried Hua Zhenming’s attack with a swift motion, smiling. “My suspicions started with brother Hua here... On the night of the Sea Tribe’s raid on the base, Lady Three had just arrived and wasn’t in charge of the fleet, so it’s understandable that she didn’t think to evacuate the people on Taiping Island. But for a pirate captain used to constant movement, relocation should have been his first reaction. And yet, he failed to do so... I found that hard to understand. Even more puzzling was that, afterward, you showed no sign of anger or blame for such a critical mistake, Uncle Hai.”

Hua Zhenming’s face darkened, his attacks growing increasingly frantic, but his strength was a level below Zhao Changhe’s, posing no real threat.

Hai Changkong, on the other hand, seemed amused. He held back from using any killing moves, engaging Zhao Changhe blow by blow, as if he was genuinely interested in what Zhao had to say and was waiting for more.

“The only conclusion I could draw was that you intended to abandon Taiping Island from the start, to give it to the Sea Tribe—maybe even as a source of food to help grow this new race... Every species needs to eat. Once they’ve mutated and gained intelligence, what do they feed on?”

The expressions of the onlookers shifted dramatically.

“Of course, this might just sound like some conspiracy theory,” Zhao Changhe continued. “It’d make me seem petty to accuse someone of treachery over a single mistake. That’s why I never mentioned it to Lady Three. But afterward, something else happened that I truly couldn’t understand...”

Hai Qianfan asked gravely, “What was that?”

“Marshal Hai Changkong mentioned that there’s a spy within the pirates, and they already know the location of the pirates’ new base... That just doesn’t add up. It hasn’t been that long since the move, and the relocation itself took several days. The only way they could have received the information so quickly is if someone went to report to the marshal the moment you arrived at the new location. But if someone was able to sneak off in a boat right after moving in and you didn’t notice, then how has the pirate crew survived this long? Uncle Hai, are you really telling Lady Three that you’re incompetent and you’ve only gotten this far by sheer luck?”

Hai Qianfan fell silent.

Zhao Changhe continued, “So I have reason to believe that there isn’t some spy sending out information—the spy is you. And perhaps it wasn’t even a boat that delivered the message. It was transmitted by the Sea Tribe, wasn’t it? That’s why your information travels faster than anyone else’s. This might be why you’ve been able to thrive in the Eastern Sea for over a decade without any other power crushing you. Otherwise, for the pirates to outpace entire nations would be beyond incredible... It seems to me that you’re nothing but Penglai’s own royal pirate crew, and that the so-called split back then was nothing but an act.”

He paused and sighed. “I’d honestly like to believe what you said earlier as well. Perhaps the reason behind this naval battle really isn’t what we think—the real reason behind this conflict could simply be that Penglai has begun to reel everything in, using the pretense of a Sea God’s decree to eliminate pirates as the perfect opportunity to unify the Eastern Sea.”

Even Hai Changkong could not help but sigh. “Impressive. Anything more?”

He looked like an eager reader waiting for the next chapter.

“Well, I’m sure there’s more, but I don’t know the full story,” Zhao Changhe replied. “If Penglai wants to unify the Eastern Sea, the Sea Emperor won’t accept it. This situation involves the struggle between the Dragon King and the Sea Emperor. Some of you are loyal to the Dragon King, while others side with the Sea Emperor, creating a very confusing situation... Lady Three and I got pulled in by accident, and her identity only made the whole thing more complicated. As for who thinks what, I’m not inside your heads, so how would I know? Now that I’ve said so much, could you tell me a few things in return to clear things up for me?”

Hai Changkong burst out laughing. “If all the people in the Central Plains are like you, then I’d better stay here in the sea for the rest of my life and not set foot on land.”

Around the same time, far away in Penglai, the Dragon King Hai Pinglan was entertaining Xia Chichi, the Four Idols Cult's saintess, as they drank and talked.

No one knew how long the conversation had gone on before, but at this point, Xia Chichi wore the same stunned expression as the spectators on Dongan Island. "Lady Three is your daughter?"

"She never told you?"

Xia Chichi scratched her head. "I've only joined the cult recently, and I haven't interacted much with Venerable Black Tortoise, so she never told me. Uh, actually, I doubt even Venerable Vermilion Bird. She never mentioned anything about it before I left."

Hai Pinglan chuckled. "She doesn't acknowledge me, and she doesn't want to talk about the past. You're much the same, aren't you?"

Xia Chichi narrowed her eyes. "You seem to know quite a bit about my situation, Your Majesty."

Hai Pinglan said casually, "It's the Wang Clan's guess, and I think they're pretty close to the truth."

Xia Chichi readily admitted, "I don't acknowledge him because he doesn't deserve it. So why doesn't she acknowledge you?"

"Because I don't deserve it either," Hai Pinglan replied calmly. "I personally suppressed her, sent people to hunt her down, and told Changkong that if he saw her, he was to kill her without mercy. If she had died, perhaps he could have become the crown prince."

Chapter 564: The Struggle Between Humans and Gods

Xia Chichi's gaze toward Hai Pinglan began to grow cold.

At first, she might have been able to interpret Hai Pinglan's expulsion of Lady Three in a more positive light, thinking he might have been trying to preserve a seed of hope. But when he uttered the words "kill her without mercy" and "he could have become the crown prince," there was no room left for forgiveness.

Back then, Hai Changkong was in his early thirties, full of ambition and drive. With such a promise dangled in front of him, he would have done everything in his power to kill Lady Three. At that time, she was just a young girl, far from the Black Tortoise of today—one wrong move, and she could have very well died.

Regardless of any underlying motives or hidden reasons, those words were unforgivable.

What was worse was that he spoke of it with a smile, without a trace of regret or realization of the gravity of his words.

Xia Chichi spoke coldly, “As I understand it, your kingdom still doesn’t have a crown prince, and Hai Changkong is in his fifties by now, right? Is that because Lady Three is still alive?”

Hai Pinglan chuckled. “Of course. Since he failed, the conditions of the promise weren’t met. I have over a hundred adopted sons, and several of them are quite capable. It’s quite difficult to decide which one to choose.”

Xia Chichi found this conversation increasingly distasteful and asked, “Why are you telling me this? Is it because you’ve learned of Lady Three’s connection to the Four Idols Cult and you’re planning to sever ties with us?”

Hai Pinglan shook his head. “If you’ve listened closely to what I’ve said, you should realize it was intentional back then. Otherwise, why would I tell you this now?”

Xia Chichi thought to herself that she did understand, but it did not matter.

Why do these rulers always act so heartless, disregarding the feelings of others in pursuit of their own goals?

One small thing stood out to her, though. Xia Longyuan only ever used the term “I” when addressing Zhao Changhe; otherwise, it was always the royal “We.” But Hai Pinglan always used either “I” or “this old man.” It was odd, in a way.

Hai Pinglan spoke again. “While traveling the seas, have you ever heard that the king of Penglai is surnamed Yuan, not Hai?”

Xia Chichi nodded. "I've heard that. But wasn't that just an early misconception? Now, everyone knows that you are the king of Penglai."

Hai Pinglan shook his head. "No, that's incorrect. I never took the throne. Legally speaking, Penglai's ruler has always been her."

Xia Chichi was stunned. "But didn't she pass away?"

"When we first began exploring the seas, we came across a powerful ancient artifact called the Soul of Water. It was said to be linked to the Black Tortoise of old... When we discovered it, a strange conflict ensued—a battle without an enemy. I was still recovering from injuries then, so I didn't participate. According to Lady Three's mother, the Soul of Water was taken by someone." Hai Pinglan sighed, then continued, "It was only much later that I realized it was never taken—the Soul of Water had always resided in her soul sea."

Xia Chichi's heart skipped a beat. "The Sea Emperor!"

"That's right. The Sea Emperor had already taken over her spirit, but we didn't realize it at the time," Hai Pinglan said. "Later, her mother and I had a disagreement. I wanted to establish a kingdom in Penglai, build an army, and return to the mainland. She believed that the Great Xia Empire was thriving and stable—there was no point in trying to disrupt things. She wanted either to settle peacefully in Penglai or to return to Jiangnan, as by then, the empire had long stopped hunting us. There was no need to keep wandering the seas. I, of course, didn't agree. I had always wanted to go back and kill your father..."

Xia Chichi: "...Well, thanks for that."

"We rarely argued, but this time, neither of us could convince the other, and it ended badly." Hai Pinglan stared into his cup, and a faint, gentle smile appeared on his lips as if he was reminiscing fondly about their argument, finding warmth in the memory.

Xia Chichi watched him in silence, waiting for him to continue.

Hai Pinglan came back to himself, sighing. "So, one day, when she suddenly changed her mind and said she was willing to establish a kingdom... Can you guess how I felt at that moment?"

Xia Chichi ventured a guess. "Ecstatic?"

“Wrong,” Hai Pinglan replied flatly. “I knew her too well. Once she makes up her mind, nothing can change it. How could she suddenly change her stance and support me for no reason? I grew cautious, testing her from different angles. I found that her memories were intact, but her personality had changed. She was no longer the same person.”

Xia Chichi was instantly captivated. “And then?”

“I may not be able to beat your father, but I’m still one of the top fighters at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, third on the Ranking of Heaven.” Hai Pinglan smiled slightly. “I suspected she’d been possessed. So, I suddenly restrained her and investigated, and sure enough, her soul sea was tainted by an unusual yin qi. It wasn’t a complete possession, but it had corrupted her enough that she was no longer herself, and she didn’t even realize it.”

Xia Chichi had an inkling of where this was going. She immediately thought of the Wang Clan’s yin qi and Wang Daoning’s pact with the tiger.

Could it be that Wang Daoning is no longer the person he once was?

Hai Pinglan continued, “By then, the injuries I’d sustained at your father’s hands had long since healed. The Sea Emperor, on the other hand, was weakened—that’s why it resorted to such underhanded means. I thought I could purge her soul sea of the yin qi... But ultimately, I learned that if you haven’t reached the Profound Control Realm, you simply can’t compete with a god or demon. Our understanding of yin spirits is nowhere near the Sea Emperor’s, even in his weakened state.”

“...You failed?”

“Yes,” Hai Pinglan answered calmly. “I killed her with my own hands. It wasn’t accidental, nor was it some mishap caused by the yin qi. I made the decision myself. I simply couldn’t bear to see someone else walking around in her body.”

Xia Chichi: “...”

“The Sea Emperor hadn’t expected me to be so ruthless. It was furious and retaliated, trying to seize control of my spiritual platform. For many years after, the battle raged in my spiritual platform.”

“You didn’t know when you might be completely taken over, so you drove Lady Three away to keep her as far away as possible, hoping she’d at least be a seed of hope left behind?” Xia Chichi asked curiously. “But earlier, you said you ordered her to be killed on sight... Was that something the Sea Emperor forced you to say?”

Hai Pinglan shook his head. “You’re overthinking it. Why are you still so hopeful, given how harsh your childhood was?”

Xia Chichi fell silent again.

“At the time, the Sea Emperor was tearing at my spirit, and she was leading her followers to challenge me. If you were in my place, wouldn’t you also suspect she had been corrupted, just like her mother? That she was here to help the Sea Emperor? Naturally, the order was to kill on sight—what was I supposed to do, let her stick around to kill me?”

Xia Chichi sighed. “If I were you, I’d order them to capture her alive.”

“It was a chaotic, urgent situation. If I’d hesitated or been too soft, we would’ve lost. A kingdom doesn’t have to be hers to inherit—what I promised to Hai Changkong still stands.” Hai Pinglan’s tone remained even.

Xia Chichi said mockingly, “If all you cared about was the succession... Well, I guess we think differently. If it’s just about that, you could’ve simply had another child—it’s not like it matters that much.”

Hai Pinglan did not argue. He only said, “Later, things changed. I wrestled with the Sea Emperor for almost a year. I was at a disadvantage, but the Sea Emperor also realized that fully possessing me would come at a high cost. So, I offered to submit.”

“Submit...?”

“I proposed that the Sea Emperor leave my soul sea, and in return, I would honor him as a god, build temples in his name, and spread his faith to aid his revival. That’s what he wanted most, and we reached an agreement.”

Xia Chichi laughed in disbelief. “When you killed your wife, I thought you had some backbone, but in the end, you still became just another puppet emperor.”

Hai Pinglan replied evenly, “Revenge is a dish best served cold. The Sea Emperor may have been revived and gained power, but I haven’t been idle either.”

“How so?”

“Back then, a group of people left with Lady Three. Ironically, they became the seeds you spoke of. No matter how the nations of the sea gradually fell, that group refused to submit. When I made contact with them in secret and explained everything, they became my hidden blades. Nations thought they were just victims of pirate raids, but the resources mostly ended up with me. On the surface, everything in Penglai was under the Sea Emperor’s watch—I was its puppet with no resources for cultivation. In reality, I had been accumulating resources for years. Once I break through to the Profound Control Realm, that will be the moment I launch my counterattack.”

Xia Chichi asked, “So, have you broken through?”

Hai Pinglan did not answer. Instead, he continued, “The plan has several stages. First, redirect trouble eastward, driving tigers to attack wolves only so you can then swallow them both. The population at sea is limited, and even combined, all the nations don’t compare to a large province of the Great Xia Empire. The growth of the Sea Emperor’s power was constrained, so it was eager to expand. I arranged for it to connect with the Wang Clan. This shifted its focus toward the mainland, which made it easier to secretly carry out my actions and also brought it into contact with Xia Longyuan.”

He paused here, his tone becoming slightly strange. “Do you know? Not long ago, the Sea Emperor and your father had an exchange from afar.”

Xia Chichi nodded. “I know. It happened during the battle between the Cui and Wang Clans.”

“That exchange left the Sea Emperor with some hidden wounds, and it also realized it might not be a match for Xia Longyuan...” Hai Pinglan’s voice held a complex emotion. “Xia Longyuan is already at that level...”

Xia Chichi’s expression remained unreadable.

Hai Pinglan snapped out of his thoughts and smiled. “In any case, the Sea Emperor became anxious. Without being fully revived, it wouldn’t be able to stand against Xia Longyuan. If that’s the case,

the Wang Clan's rebellion would be pointless. At this point, I ordered the pirates to drive fishermen and merchants away from the sea, denying the Sea Emperor even the small number of followers it had left. Enraged, it commanded the nations to eradicate the pirates. Simultaneously, it devised a sacrificial ritual—a plan it had initially avoided. It inscribed arrays on the ships, turning casualties in battle into sacrificial offerings. Not a single drop was to be wasted.”

Xia Chichi was clearly fascinated. “So, how did you undermine it from the shadows?”

“Initially, the Sea Emperor only intended to use the casualties from the war as nourishment. But I had Changkong and Qianfan work together to turn the situation into a trap—making it look like everyone was meant to be sacrificed. I also negotiated with a small nation to surrender in advance and reveal the sacrificial array at the right time. This way, others would survive and return to spread the word, leading to a complete collapse in the Sea Emperor's support base. It wouldn't just fail to revive—it might even end up weaker than before.”

He sighed. “I had my plan, and the Sea Emperor had its own schemes. On the surface, it gathered the nations to exterminate the pirates, but it secretly used the Sea Tribe it had nurtured over the years to launch a surprise attack on the pirates. This was my miscalculation—I never expected that after all these years of loyalty, there would still be those in the pirate crew who would turn to the Sea Emperor...”

Chapter 565: The Overlooked

Zhao Changhe could not hear the conversation happening elsewhere, but once he deduced that Hai Qianfan was part of some royal pirate crew, he could understand why Hai Qianfan had left the third leader position open for Lady Three.

From their perspective, Lady Three's escape was likely something she and Hai Pinglan had agreed upon. Since they later rejoined under Hai Pinglan, it made sense politically to leave Lady Three's position vacant and wait for her return. It was a matter of making a statement.

But just as Lady Three could not understand why they had betrayed her, Hai Pinglan also struggled to grasp their motivation for turning traitor.

They were once loyalists, unable to accept Lady Three's mother being unjustly killed, and they had protected the young Lady Three during her escape. When the misunderstanding was later resolved, perhaps they felt they needed to atone, serving Hai Pinglan loyally—raiding and gathering resources—all without fail over the years.

So why, at the critical moment when Hai Pinglan began his plans to counter the Sea Emperor, did they suddenly betray him?

“Could it be that they’ve been influenced or controlled by the Sea Emperor?” Xia Chichi suggested, joining in to help Hai Pinglan analyze the situation.

Hai Pinglan shook his head. “If that were the case, I would know. I’m more sensitive to the Sea Emperor’s presence than he realizes. One of the conditions of our uneasy cooperation was that it wouldn’t interfere with my trusted men. If it did, everything would fall apart immediately. Hai Qianfan and Hai Changkong are always under my watch—there shouldn’t have been any issue. I’m certain that as recently as a few months ago, the Sea Emperor hadn’t even found the pirates’ location.”

Xia Chichi frowned. “Then what’s the reason? Did they get found recently and fear the Sea Emperor’s power?”

Hai Pinglan’s gaze grew distant. “I’d like to know that myself.”

On Dongan Island, Lady Three coldly stared at Hai Qianfan, waiting for his explanation.

Hai Qianfan looked up at the sky for a moment. It was clear and bright, without a single cloud.

Suddenly, he smiled and said, “It’s actually quite simple. You’re all caught up in your own struggle against gods and demons, but you’ve forgotten one thing—our ordinary human nature.”

Lady Three’s expression remained cold. “Explain.”

“When I was young, the Dragon King took me in, taught me martial arts, and treated me well. Later, I followed him into exile across the sea. Your mother led everyone through countless hardships, and we all had a deep respect for her. In those early days, we were passionate and ready to give everything for our family. That much was true.” Hai Qianfan lowered his gaze, meeting Lady Three’s eyes with a hint of warmth. “Lady Three, if you’d stayed, perhaps things would have turned out differently...”

Lady Three was momentarily taken aback.

“Lady Three, the pirate crew was formed to protect you when we left Penglai. When you said to disband, it was already over. Later, when His Majesty reached out to us and resolved the misunderstanding, the old brothers were genuinely moved. Honestly, I was excited too. I was even willing to continue serving...”

“Wait, what misunderstanding?” Lady Three interjected.

Hai Qianfan glanced around at the crowd. There were too many people present, including the water figure, so he did not elaborate. He simply shook his head and said, “In any case, we took up the pirate banner again for His Majesty. Zhao Changhe was right when he called us a royal pirate crew. But the problem was this: pirates are often isolated, and His Majesty couldn’t trust us unconditionally. Even among the old brothers, there were doubts about whether I had other intentions. So, we needed your name—to maintain your position—to keep everyone’s suspicions at bay.”

Lady Three responded calmly, “Makes sense.”

“But Lady Three...” Hai Qianfan sighed. “For years, you led the pirates across the Eastern Sea, powerful and commanding, with a single word bringing thousands to heel. Your authority was no less than that of any king. Yet most of what we earned went to Penglai, and the force that I worked so hard to build was kept in reserve, waiting for you to return... If you were in my place, how would you feel?”

Lady Three replied, “I would try to slowly build my own faction, change course, and claim the throne myself.”

Hai Qianfan nodded. “Exactly. Over the years, some of the old brothers either died in battle or retired to Taiping Island to handle logistics. I trained people like Hua Zhenming, and the pirate crew began to evolve. Eventually, we renamed ourselves the Furious Pirates, and I declared myself leader. That was the beginning of my preparations to cut ties with Penglai.”

Zhao Changhe could not help but interject, “So that’s why the Heavenly Origin Pirates were also called the Furious Pirates? I hadn’t thought of that.”

Hai Qianfan continued, “It was around that time that Lady Three came to us as the Black Tortoise, establishing a trade link. At first, I was happy—it meant we had another outlet for our goods, independent of Penglai, as well as technical support for shipbuilding from the Great Xia Empire. But that visit also made me realize just how influential Lady Three still was among the pirates. The constant mention of her as the true leader, the curiosity about her, combined with her beauty and

strength—even the newer members embraced Lady Three without hesitation. The old brothers were loyal without question. I had no choice but to act like I was following orders... Lady Three's involvement reestablished the identity of the Furious Pirates as hers, undermining years of my preparation to cut ties."

Lady Three stared ahead in silence, lost in thought.

Zhao Changhe said, "If Lady Three were to die, that wouldn't be a problem anymore, right?"

"Yup. If she died, it would solve a lot of problems." Hai Qianfan glanced at Hai Changkong and added coldly, "The same goes for Hai Changkong."

Hai Changkong smiled but said nothing.

Hai Qianfan continued, "This battle has been planned well in advance. It really had nothing to do with Lady Three in the beginning."

Zhao Changhe commented, "But it just so happened that she arrived at this critical moment?"

"Not only did she arrive, but also did so during a moment when His Majesty was reconciling the past, and there was a significant chance of a father-daughter reunion. Hai Changkong's long-held hopes would be dashed, and so would mine. The pirates would be disbanded, and at best, we'd retire as minor officials. But it would be more likely that we'd be discarded once we've outlived our usefulness."

"So, after thinking it through, you decided it was better to join the Sea Emperor?"

Hai Qianfan did not deny it, which was enough of an answer.

"Lady Three's existence has become your obsession." Zhao Changhe sighed. "To get rid of her, you've abandoned everything you once stood for. Have you considered that even if you kill Lady Three, the pirates won't necessarily belong to you? The Sea Emperor will tell you what to do. You'd be doing nothing more than replacing one master with another."

Hai Qianfan's expression did not change. "The Sea Emperor has propped up plenty of kings from the island nations—one more like me doesn't matter. All I have to do is worship him. Compared to that, Hai Pinglan would never allow me to control the pirates forever."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "So that's why you leaked the crew's location to the Sea Tribe for the night raid. Your real goal was to use them to eliminate Lady Three. And since there were plenty of loyalists to her and Hai Pinglan on Dongan Island, you figured you might as well get rid of them all at once."

"Exactly."

"And all those innocent people caught up in it didn't matter to you?"

"The rest were just brothel girls, cooks, errand boys, and laborers—do they really count as people?"

Lady Three looked up at the sky, silent.

Hai Qianfan said that they were too focused on their fight against gods and demons, forgetting to consider ordinary human nature.

That might be true. Whether it was Hai Pinglan or Lady Three herself, they had not considered those things, leading to unexpected betrayals from people they'd never imagined, nearly causing everything to fall apart.

But wasn't Hai Qianfan just as bad? No... he was even worse. He had ignored the value of the even more ordinary people, disregarding not just their lives but their very humanity.

Zhao Changhe clicked his tongue. "Too bad you didn't anticipate that Lady Three wasn't at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries but the third. The water figure couldn't take her down, and you couldn't move against her in secret because the entire pirate crew was watching. That must've been frustrating, huh?"

Hai Qianfan glanced at Lady Three, who had remained silent, then at the water figure, now fully reformed, and finally spoke up again. "None of this originally had anything to do with you two. You could've stayed away. Now that you're here, there's no point in talking further. The answers have been given, and you two don't have the strength to handle all of us at once. Are you satisfied enough to die now?"

Zhao Changhe looked puzzled. “That’s odd. Why are you so sure we can’t handle you all? Because of your army?”

Hai Qianfan smirked. “The water figure might have been damaged, but Lady Three is also injured. She can’t take down the water figure quickly, or else she wouldn’t be standing here listening to stories. She’s buying time to recover.”

Zhao Changhe shrugged. “But I’m not injured.”

“You?” Hai Qianfan sized him up for a moment, then burst into laughter. “You may be strong, but do you really think you can handle me, Changkong, and Zhenming all at once?”

Zhao Changhe spoke seriously, “I think I can... Three moves? No, maybe just one?”

Hai Qianfan’s laughter grew louder. “My head is right here—if you think you can take it in one move, come and try!”

Before he even finished speaking, Zhao Changhe swung his saber in a horizontal arc.

The sea breeze seemed to soften, and the crashing waves became gentle mist, as though the air had lost its tension, masking the hidden threat.

By the time Hai Qianfan realized, the tip of Zhao Changhe’s saber was already at his throat.

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

Hai Qianfan was at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, and he was naturally prepared. He raised his saber vertically just in time to block Zhao Changhe’s strike, and his laughter grew even louder. “Is that your one—”

Before he could utter the word “move,” the sound of wind rose behind him. Another saber, just as swift, glided like an osprey, brushing lightly against his neck.

Blood spurted out suddenly, and Hai Qianfan's eyes widened in disbelief, his smile frozen on his face.

He turned in disbelief. "Hai Changkong, you—"

Zhao Changhe seemed to have anticipated this all along. He immediately redirected Dragon Bird to cut across Hua Zhenming's throat before he even realized what had happened.

The two fell simultaneously, failing to understand why they'd died.

Hai Changkong sheathed his blade, spitting to the side. "Who told you I was just like you? Like you, my ass."

Chapter 566: The Edge of the Sea and Sky

For a moment, everything fell silent. The onlookers were stunned, Lady Three included. She had almost forgotten they were still in the middle of a battle and instinctively scratched her head.

In the end, it turned out Hai Qianfan, once thought loyal, was the traitor, and Hai Changkong, who had pursued her as an enemy, was actually on their side.

How did Zhao Changhe figure it out? And how did they coordinate everything so perfectly?

Even the water figure froze in shock before it erupted in fury, "Hai Changkong, what are you doing?!"

Hai Changkong glanced at it. "For years, I've hidden my intentions. Pretending to want to kill those I didn't wish to harm, pretending to cooperate with traitors I knew existed, while loyalists saw me as their enemy, secretly passing information to traitors to keep me out of the loop. And all this time, I protected those very people, to keep them from being discovered by you lot. Do you have any idea what that does to a person?"

The general who had tried to pass a message during the night raid, only to be stopped, stood dazed in the distance, slowly emerging from his confusion.

The army was rife with followers of the Sea Emperor—there were likely even members of the Sea Tribe among them. Before the Dragon King openly turned against the Sea Emperor, Hai Changkong could not reveal his true loyalties, lest it jeopardized the Dragon King's plans.

The water figure snarled, "And you dare reveal them now?"

"If you haven't figured out by now that His Majesty has decided to break ties with the Sea Emperor, then you're not as smart as I gave you credit for..." Hai Changkong smirked. "Originally, I wouldn't have revealed anything to you directly. After all, I'm not strong enough to defeat you. I would have waited until the battle was over before reporting back. But now, with Lady Three and Young Master Zhao here, you're the one who's about to die. So why shouldn't I dare?"

Lady Three glanced at him, hesitating as if she wanted to say something, but ultimately remained silent. She suddenly lunged at the water figure.

What needed to be said had been said. There was no point in dragging out further conversation in front of the water figure.

In the next moment, Zhao Changhe's sword and saber, along with Hai Changkong's saber, joined Lady Three's attack, closing in on the water figure from different angles.

Faced with the combined assault of all three, the already-wounded water figure stood no chance. Energy surged, waves scattered, and in an instant, the water figure was destroyed, leaving behind a single blue crystal suspended in the air.

Lady Three took the crystal, still lost in her thoughts, unsure of what to say. Zhao Changhe also had nothing in particular to add, so he casually tried to lighten the mood and said, "It seems like the Sea Emperor isn't going to make a move again this time. I thought it wouldn't be so easy."

Lady Three replied, "The last time he intervened, he couldn't crush us outright. There would be no point in him wasting his strength carelessly now."

Zhao Changhe nodded, then added, "This water figure is supposed to have power at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, but I feel like it can't actually compare to a real Ranking of Heaven expert. Anyway, now we have three of these crystals..."

Lady Three nodded. “A construct is still just a construct. It has many limitations, like the fact that it’ll never have your devious mind for baiting enemies with hidden tricks.”

I was trying to lighten the mood, so why are you insulting me... Zhao Changhe smiled wryly, about to say something when Hai Changkong interrupted their banter and directly asked, “Princess, do you still hate me?”

Lady Three looked at him again. She had told Zhao Changhe before that she did not hold a grudge against Hai Changkong, but that did not mean she had no lingering resentment.

Since he had brought it up directly, she answered evenly, “In the past, you were just following orders, so there’s nothing I can say about that. But as Hai Qianfan said, killing me would solve many problems, and it’s no different for you. If I die, you’d have a much better chance of claiming Penglai. How do I know that you don’t still have such ideas?”

Hai Changkong chuckled. “Well, you have no interest in claiming Penglai, for one. In other words, you aren’t an obstacle to me. With that being the case, why would I bother creating trouble for myself? Besides, if His Majesty ever grows sentimental in his old age, he might look upon the one who harmed you with nothing but disdain. Who would I complain to then?”

Even Zhao Changhe could not help but give him a surprised look after hearing his reply.

He made a lot of sense, but very few people were this clear-minded about such matters.

It seems this marshal really is someone special.

Hai Changkong smiled casually. “I don’t mind if you dislike me, as long as personal feelings don’t interfere with what needs to be done. For now, I’ll clean up the battlefield and then take the two of you to Penglai.”

With that, he strode away toward the warships.

The naval battle was already nearing its conclusion.

The scene of their leader being beheaded had not gone unnoticed. The pirates were left stunned, unsure of what to do. The naval forces that were on the brink of being completely wiped out found

their chance to break through and scattered, quickly disappearing from sight. Hai Changkong made no move to pursue. He still needed Lai Qi to spread the word of the sacrifice that had been carried out here, with the surviving soldiers from each nation as additional witnesses.

To shake the foundation of faith in the Sea God was the greatest blow that could be delivered against the Sea Emperor. The years of accumulation and worship would crumble at the news of his forsaking of his followers.

If you want to kill a snake, you have to crush its head. Hai Pinglan had been biding his time for years, and now, at last, he bared his fangs against the ancient god.

If Lady Three had not come, perhaps there would have been no complications, and Hai Pinglan's plan would have gone off without a hitch. Hai Qianfan might have remained loyal to the end. Lady Three's arrival had triggered his betrayal, but ultimately, nothing changed. The outcome remained unchanged.

If there was any difference, it was that it brought Shelly into Zhao Changhe's arms.

Zhao Changhe tugged at Lady Three's sleeve. "Are we heading to Penglai?"

Lady Three frowned. "You want to meet up with Chichi, don't you?"

"Uh..."

Lady Three was annoyed. "Chichi should be out exploring that island. It's unlikely she'd stay in Penglai for long. I feel like going there would be pointless. I originally came here to get the pirate crew to help find that island... but with one thing after another, I nearly forgot what I was doing in the first place..."

Zhao Changhe nodded.

Of all her identities, it was clear that the one Lady Three truly cared for, the one she felt most committed to, was the Black Tortoise of the Four Idols Cult.

Xia Chichi had begun a voyage to the Eastern Sea to locate the special place that Xia Longyuan had mentioned, one that could help her break through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries. It

seemed like it was only about her own progress, but being a saintess on the verge of reaching that level at such a young age was a major event for the cult, practically guaranteeing her position as cult leader in the future. Vermilion Bird had taken it very seriously, and Black Tortoise had come to help for the same reason. By comparison, the rebellion of the Wang Clan, though causing a stir, was insignificant to the Four Idols Cult.

Who could have guessed that Lady Three's side quest would turn her into the main character, unexpectedly drawing her into a pivotal role? Even now, her head was still spinning.

Lady Three added, "I don't want to dwell on grudges with Hai Changkong right now. Finding that place is impossible without their influence. I don't really want to talk to him, so you should handle the questioning. This is really important for us."

Zhao Changhe patted her head. "Got it."

"Don't pat my head!"

"Then how about somewhere else?" Zhao Changhe grinned, taking her hand. "We've got our own ship."

"The Tang Clan's ship, you mean? Who said it's ours?!"

The two of them strode over the waves, hand in hand, their bickering drifting off into the distance until it faded from earshot.

* * *

As Hai Pinglan spoke with Xia Chichi, he suddenly turned to look out the window as if sensing an invisible current swirling in the sky before dissipating.

He stared for a long while before finally smiling. "The tides of fate are changing. From the moment the Sea Emperor blindly extended his reach to the mainland, scattering his focus and provoking your father, I knew this day would come sooner or later."

Xia Chichi blinked.

Hai Pinglan stood up. “Let’s go, young lady.”

As he stood, Xia Chichi realized how tall he was. She could imagine the commanding presence he must have had during his prime, in the days when he roamed the jianghu. But perhaps due to the long years of old injuries, and the constant struggle against the Sea Emperor, his body seemed to have deteriorated badly. He looked frail and ancient—though he was only a little over sixty, he seemed more like eighty or ninety, as if he had aged an entire generation beyond Xia Longyuan.

Xia Chichi sighed internally, pretending to be oblivious. “Go where?”

“You’ve been having people search for a specific part of the sea. You couldn’t have possibly thought that you could hide that from me, did you?”

“I wasn’t trying to hide it from you, Uncle, but I didn’t ask for your help either...”

The term “uncle” left Hai Pinglan stunned for a moment before he burst into laughter. “I’ve never called Xia Longyuan my brother, nor do I intend to. There’s no need to use that term to soften me up. I’m not going to harm you, so why are you acting so cautious?”

Xia Chichi pouted in response.

She had not come here as an envoy to Penglai; her goal was to find a specific location.

In the first few days, Xia Chichi did not want to directly interact with Penglai’s officials. After her previous voyage, her general, Wood Flood Dragon of Jiao—whom Zhao Changhe had met a few times, and who was one of the Ranking of Man elders—had established a small outpost here. Xia Chichi had instructed him to look for a sea region that matched the visions shown by Xia Longyuan.

But it was a task far beyond the capacity of someone like the Wood Flood Dragon of Jiao, who was relatively new to the area. When he heard the request, he almost cried, and after searching in vain for some time, he simply admitted to Xia Chichi that he could not accomplish the task.

After hesitating for a while, Xia Chichi decided to meet Hai Pinglan. They were allies after all, and it was far easier to do things openly than to sneak around.

However, before meeting Hai Pinglan, Xia Chichi never imagined that the core of their conversation would revolve around Venerable Black Tortoise, nor that he would be so certain of her identity as Xia Longyuan's daughter. Their relationship had taken on a strange twist, with discussions that went far deeper than any initial diplomatic meeting should have gone.

And she had not even mentioned the request to have her ally help search for a place; Hai Pinglan had brought it up himself.

She had thought that the sea was isolated, but it turned out that she herself was the one left in the dark. They knew far more than she did, while she was only just starting to understand them.

"If I'm not mistaken, there are only a few places you could be looking for..." Hai Pinglan said with a smile. "The legendary edge of the sea and sky, the place where the sun rises—do you want to see it?"

Xia Chichi blurted out, "Yes!"

Hai Pinglan chuckled. "Then let's go. The journey will take quite some time."

Xia Chichi was taken aback. "You mean... you're coming too?"

"Of course. Xia Longyuan is using you as bait for the Sea Emperor, and I'm driving him to attack the wolf. If not now, then when?"

Hai Pinglan strode out, and from behind, for a moment, he looked like he was still in his prime.

Chapter 567: The Heart of a Warrior

On the Tang Clan's flagship.

The fleet had been waiting for Zhao Changhe near the pirates' new island. When he and Lady Three had gone missing while pursuing the water figure, the "loyal" Hai Qianfan had not even bothered to search for them. It was the Tang Clan's fleet that had been frantically searching as if they had lost their patriarch.

Officially, they were Tang Clan merchants headed to Penglai. In reality, they were a private escort force dispatched by Tang Wanzhuang for Zhao Changhe. Their sole duty was to follow Zhao Changhe's orders. From the perspective of an aristocratic family making a strategic bet, this was the Tang Clan putting all their chips on Zhao Changhe, their fates intertwined for better or worse.

Of course, the members of the Tang Clan were well aware of their role, which led to some less-than-pleasant looks at the alluring, mature woman Zhao Changhe had brought aboard. They eyed Lady Three with suspicion and wariness.

Lady Three, meanwhile, owed them a debt of gratitude, since they had helped save the residents of Taiping Island from the Sea Tribe. Despite her frustrations with Tang Wanzhuang, she had no choice but to endure the Tang Clan's crew looking at her like she was some kind of mistress. Lady Three forced herself to smile politely before eventually giving up and retreating to her cabin, where she busied herself examining the crystals they had obtained.

Tang En, however, had no interest in Lady Three. Instead, he spoke to Zhao Changhe with a mix of frustration and concern. "Your Highness, you really shouldn't be like this. We understand you leading from the front, charging into battle—that is, after all, your style as the Blood Asura. But is it really fitting for someone of your status to chase after stragglers on your own? Do you know how much is on the line with your safety? Forget everything else—if something happened to you, I'd lose my head when I got back. Are you trying to force me to become a pirate?"

Zhao Changhe was at a loss for words. Xia Longyuan and his daughter have already reconciled, yet you're still calling me Your Highness? This is getting awkward...

"Wanzhuang wouldn't go that far... But I guess Buqi might?"

"You've got it backward. If I lost you, who do you think would kill me first, the young master or the young lady?"

"..."

Tang En sighed and decided not to press further. "What's going on here, anyway? The pirates seem tense. Are they fighting among themselves? Do you need us to do anything?"

"There's a purge happening... It's probably best if we don't get involved," Zhao Changhe replied. "During these past few days with the pirates, have you managed to ask about the island we're searching for? That's the real reason we're here."

“I asked Hua Zhenming, and he said he didn’t know,” Tang En said. “The Heavenly Origin Pirates should be more familiar with strange and unknown places at sea than most nations. If even they don’t know, then it’s going to be really tough to find.”

“Why not ask me?” Hai Changkong’s voice came from somewhere nearby. “The pirates share most of their information with us. His Majesty relies on these channels to keep track of most of what goes on at sea.”

Zhao Changhe turned his head and saw Hai Changkong standing alone on a small boat, drifting toward them effortlessly.

The conversation had been taking place out on the deck, with no attempt to keep their voices down. Given Hai Changkong’s abilities, overhearing them was perfectly natural. Zhao Changhe did not mind and asked, “Are you willing to share information with us?”

Hai Changkong gracefully boarded the ship, glanced around, and sighed. “This is a fine ship... Having combined the Four Idols Cult’s and the Wang Clan’s technology, I thought we had achieved the pinnacle of shipbuilding. But it seems the Tang Clan’s ships are still a level above ours.”

Zhao Changhe commented, “The Four Idols Cult doesn’t specialize in shipbuilding. The fact that they even provided the pirates with decent designs is already something. As for the Wang Clan, do you really think they’d give you the best they had?”

“Fair point...” Hai Changkong admitted, though his eyes continued to linger on the ship, especially the ballistae as if he wanted to take them away with him.

Zhao Changhe understood immediately. “If you’re thinking about getting this technology for yourself, there’s no chance.”

Hai Changkong sighed. “...What if we pay? Name your price.”

“No amount is enough,” Zhao Changhe replied bluntly. He then turned to Tang En. “Make sure you stay firm on this. No matter what they offer, it’s not for sale.”

Tang En chuckled and nodded. “Understood.”

Hai Changkong sighed again. “You aren’t exactly some official of Xia, so why are you so rigid about this?”

“How do you know I’m not?”

“So, do you still want those clues about the island you’re looking for?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “This is about principle. We’ve helped you turn against the Sea Emperor, not to mention the fact that the place we’re searching for may have ties to the Sea Emperor. It would be petty to withhold information over something like this. And I don’t think you’re that kind of person.”

Hai Changkong chuckled. “Oh? Zhao Changhe, do you really think you know me? By the way, why were you so sure I would help you kill Hai Qianfan? You were even talking about doing it in one move. I still don’t understand—how did you know my intentions?”

Inside the cabin, Lady Three perked up her ears to listen.

“Last night, you stopped that general from passing along a message. The only explanation for that is that you were actually protecting him. When I assumed the pirate side had traitors, that logic made perfect sense. And besides, earlier, when we were breaking the formation, you mentioned that sinking the ship was enough, that there was no need to fight the water figure head-on. It was practically a hint. That made it even clearer that you were on our side, or at least not on the Sea Emperor’s side.”

“That’s all it took? You were willing to bet on that?” Hai Changkong asked.

“Bet? I was just bluffing,” Zhao Changhe grinned.

“...”

“If you hadn’t gone along with it, then sure, I’d have been embarrassed for a moment. But I’d just grab Lady Three, and we’d run for it. Saying that didn’t actually change anything—it was worth it just for the show.”

Lady Three, listening inside the cabin, could not help but smile wryly. Hai Changkong also found himself laughing. “So all along, you were just bluffing?”

“What’s the point of living if you don’t show off a bit?” Zhao Changhe said shamelessly. “Aren’t you the same?”

Hai Changkong frowned. “How am I the same? Why do you people always insist I’m just like you?”

This time, Zhao Changhe did not joke. He turned, leaning on the ship’s railing, and looked out at the vast expanse of sea and sky. After a moment, he spoke, “You’re a true martial artist, aren’t you?”

Hai Changkong paused, caught off guard.

“You want to test your skills, to make your name known across the land. You’re among the top martial artists, at the second layer of the Profound Mysteries, so how would you be willing to spend your entire life sailing the Eastern Sea, remaining unknown? Even Wang Daozhong is recognized by the world, and I think you’re far stronger than him.”

Hai Changkong did not say anything.

Zhao Changhe continued, “I could feel it—your desire to truly fight me. The intent behind your saber resonated with me. At that moment, you weren’t thinking about anything else, just that you wanted to have that duel.”

Hai Changkong remained silent for a moment, then joined Zhao Changhe at the railing, both of them staring at the sea.

After a long while, he spoke in a low voice, “I’m unwilling to accept it. I may roam the seas freely, but it’s like wearing fine clothes in the dark. If there was no Ranking of Troubled Times in this world, that would be one thing... but with it, it really stirs the ambition inside me.”

“That’s why they’re called the Rankings of Troubled Times.”

“Yes.” Hai Changkong nodded. “I know I can’t break through anymore. My potential has reached its limit, and I’m nearly fifty. I no longer have the confidence to go further. I once thought that if the so-called King of Man in the rankings wasn’t all that impressive, I could return, roam freely, and earn the admiration of the world... But I have to admit, I’m no match for you. So, it’s time to accept reality and focus on my business here at sea.”

Zhao Changhe looked at him. “Are you really going to give up just like that?”

Hai Changkong smiled. “Facing reality isn’t shameful. You’re very strong.”

Zhao Changhe grinned. “See? Don’t you want to show your skills in front of others? You’re just like me, aren’t you?”

Hai Changkong finally laughed heartily. “Alright, alright. Yes, I’m just like you.”

Zhao Changhe turned to Tang En. “Got some wine?”

Tang En went to retrieve the wine from the cabin, remarking, “To be famous, a man must first be drunk, right?”

Zhao Changhe pointed at him and laughed. “You knew exactly what I wanted.”

Tang En chuckled. “Every true warrior shares the same heart, don’t they?”

The men’s laughter and boisterous drinking echoed across the deck, carried away by the sea breeze without restraint.

Inside her cabin, Lady Three thought to herself, Who wants to be like you lot? Fame and glory? I’d rather sleep.

But as she listened to their carefree drinking and banter, something in her—a part of her shared by both pirates and bandits—stirred. With a loud clatter, she pushed the door open, marched over to Zhao Changhe, and slammed her hand on the table. “I want a drink too.”

Zhao Changhe handed Lady Three a bowl of wine, which she downed in one swift motion.

Hai Changkong watched Lady Three drink with such ease, a nostalgic look appearing in his eyes. “You really do remind me of her...”

Lady Three put the bowl down and glared at him. “What’s this, did you have a crush on my mother or something?”

Hai Changkong answered honestly, “I was young back then, and I spent most of my life at sea... After a while, even a pig might start to look charming, let alone someone like your mother. You could ask any of the old brothers—every one of them admired her. It wasn’t just me.”

Lady Three was momentarily left speechless.

Zhao Changhe asked, “Is your rebellion against the Sea Emperor related to that?”

Hai Changkong sighed. “You’re truly perceptive, Young Master Zhao. The Sea Emperor was indeed the one responsible for what happened back then. I still believe that the princess could reconcile with His Majesty. After all, blood is thicker than water.”

Lady Three remained silent.

Although Hai Changkong’s actions had already given her some clues, and it was the answer she had hoped for, she found that she did not feel the joy she had anticipated—only a strange sense of calm.

It was also clear that, while Hai Changkong said this, he did not genuinely want the father and daughter to reconcile. He quickly added, “To be honest, we didn’t initially know all the details back then, but when the Sea God began to manifest its miracles and spread its teachings, we were resistant to worshipping them. His Majesty wanted to establish a temple, and we even had a falling out over it.”

“Oh?” Zhao Changhe’s curiosity was piqued. “Why? I would think that sailors, facing constant threats from the sea, would welcome a god that could perform miracles. Faith in such a god should come easily.”

“And what’s the point?” Hai Changkong replied flatly. “The believers are saved, and the non-believers face divine punishment... How is that any different from an invading nation? Surrender

and be rewarded, resist and be wiped out. What's the difference? We went into exile at sea because we refused to surrender. Do you really think we'd surrender to a different power out here?"

Tang En was taken aback, clearly falling deep in thought.

Hai Changkong continued, "Ordinary people may have no choice, but why should we warriors entrust our lives to someone else? We should conquer the waves ourselves, conquer the sea. Isn't that right?"

Lady Three's wine bowl hovered near her lips, and she found herself at a loss for words.

By that logic, isn't the faith of the Four Idols Cult also just as meaningless? Even though the teaching might differ... At its core, isn't it also about relying on someone else?

She turned to look at Zhao Changhe, who was grinning widely. He raised his bowl and clinked it heavily against Hai Changkong's. "Well said, well said! A toast to that!"

Lady Three watched the men drink, lost in thought. Suddenly, she understood why Zhao Changhe always said that the biggest problem between him and the Four Idols Cult was that he could never truly embrace their faith.

He had always believed only in his own strength.

Chapter 568: Mirage

While the men drank, Lady Three remained distant, lost in her thoughts, her mood never quite lifting.

Though he found Zhao Changhe to be someone he got along with surprisingly well, Hai Changkong also had too much weighing on him to fully enjoy the moment. The reality of it all was strangely disjointed—he had come aboard the Tang Clan's ship mainly to determine Zhao Changhe and Lady Three's purpose at sea, especially given they had brought a formidable fleet. It was unsettling not knowing their intentions. The irony was that amidst all the chaos, only now were they finally beginning to understand each other's goals.

When he learned that Zhao Changhe was simply looking for an island, Hai Changkong could only shake his head with a wry smile. “Hai Qianfan really had the worst luck. All of this had nothing to do with you, yet here you are, turning everything upside down.”

“Who says it has nothing to do with me? Shel... I mean, Lady Three’s matters are my matters,” Zhao Changhe said with a grin.

Hai Changkong glanced at Lady Three, who still seemed lost in her own thoughts, apparently unaware of Zhao Changhe’s words. He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Tell me about this island you’re looking for.”

Zhao Changhe gave a brief description. Nearby, Tang En showed interest. “If we can see the mansion of Xin[1] with our own eyes, then we’d practically be at the boundary between sea and sky, no?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Theoretically, yes. But can we really reach the edge of the world by sailing east?”

Hai Changkong shook his head. “Sailing the ocean isn’t that simple. If you blindly sail in a straight line, you’ll end up trapped in unknown currents, not to mention the issues with supplies and so on... Throughout history, many have sought the edge of the world, but who has ever succeeded?”

“Uh...”

“The place you’re talking about does exist, but it’s not the real boundary between the sea and sky. In reality, it’s an island in the middle of the ocean. The sun, moon, and stars seem to be right in front of you, but it’s generally considered a mirage—a reflection of the true horizon far in the distance. Of course, followers of the Sea God see it as divine intervention.” Hai Changkong smiled. “And, to be fair, the Sea God may well be nearby. The mirage could in fact be caused by the Sea God’s power distorting reality.”

Zhao Changhe’s spirits lifted. “Where is this island?”

Hai Changkong stood up. “There are actually quite a number of people who know about the island. There are plenty of pirates who are familiar with it. Find a couple of experienced guides, and they’ll get you there.”

Tang En scowled, muttering, “That sly bastard Hua Zhenming told me he didn’t know.”

“Hua Zhenming probably had his eye on your ship, planning to keep you around, finish their business, and then slowly deal with you afterward... though they didn’t get the chance to put that plan into action.” Hai Changkong clasped his hands together in a formal gesture. “Have the customs changed back on the mainland?”

Zhao Changhe returned the gesture. “No, they haven’t.”

“Then I’ll be taking my leave for now.” Hai Changkong leaped back onto his small boat. “Perhaps, when we meet again, we can share more wine and cross blades once more.”

Tang En watched Hai Changkong’s figure grow smaller in the distance, nodding in approval. “Marshal Hai is quite the man.”

Zhao Changhe nodded in agreement. To be fair, even Hai Qianfan was quite the character—after all, not just anyone could roam the seas for years, becoming a pirate leader feared by nations. That required more than just backing. It was just a shame that his ambition turned into an obsession, leading to his swift demise with hardly a word spoken.

These men, all with the surname Hai, were adopted sons taken in by Hai Pinglan in his youth, trained in his martial arts. It spoke volumes about Hai Pinglan’s legacy. If nothing else, having personally trained two warriors to the level of the Ranking of Earth was an accomplishment that far outstripped any master among the Central Plains’ Ranking of Heaven.

Of course, the constant fighting at sea also played a role. While the Central Plains were just entering a time of unrest, the nations at sea had been battling one another for years. The ocean itself offered an abundance of unique resources, enough to sustain many. Unfortunately, these advantages were not yet fully realized by most.

For example, the pirates’ stash had evidently been confiscated by Hai Changkong. With the entire pirate crew reabsorbed by Penglai, who knew how many managed to escape to continue their lives as pirates? But as a unified force, they were unlikely to ever rise again. Zhao Changhe, despite his hopes, did not manage to acquire any of their valuable treasures. He did, however, secure some medicinal herbs, fresh water, and a group of experienced sailors to serve as guides.

An unexpected gain was a few cannons, though they were more akin to primitive stone cannons.

The pirates' base had a few of these heavy weapons in their warehouse. They were cumbersome and inconvenient, which was why Hai Changkong had not taken them all. Zhao Changhe had them loaded onto the ship, and a few of the men squatted around the cannons, studying them.

"These things don't seem that great. Their range is poor, their power low, their accuracy awful, the barrels fragile, and the reload time is too long. Your Highness, why are you so interested in them?"

"Old Tang, everything else aside, you can't be criticizing the reload time. Your ballistae take even longer between shots."

"But our shots are stronger and go farther," Tang En replied confidently.

"Were they always that strong?"

Tang En paused, suddenly thoughtful.

Zhao Changhe finally stood up, heading towards the cabin. "In any case, this isn't something you can figure out on your own. Leave it to the experts. Let's set sail for that island where the boundary between sea and sky can be seen. There's no need to go to Penglai."

"Understood."

"Pass a message to Wanzhuang and Buqi telling them to find some skilled craftsmen and invest some effort into improving this technology. Believe me, ballistae will eventually be replaced by these cannons." As Zhao Changhe walked, he paused for a moment as if in deep thought. "Who knows, even half of us warriors may be replaced by them someday."

In a world like this, Zhao Changhe dared to predict that only half of the martial artists would be rendered obsolete.

After all, those who had reached the Profound Control Realm had already transcended physical limitations and begun cultivating their souls, something beyond the capabilities of modern technology. Then there were also beings like the blind woman, whose abilities seemed to transcend space and time itself, a level of power that was beyond anything human technology could seemingly ever achieve.

“Hey, blind woman.”

“What?”

“Whoa, I was just casually calling to see if you’d answer, and you actually did!”

The blind woman let out a soft sigh.

“Well, since you’re here, tell me—how does an atomic bomb compare to you?”

“Ridiculous.” The blind woman’s tone was indifferent. “Instead of such nonsense, why don’t you explain your intentions behind guiding Hai Changkong to discuss his beliefs? What were you really after?”

Zhao Changhe feigned innocence. “Hai Changkong spoke on his own. What does that have to do with me?”

“Hmm...” The blind woman’s voice carried a note of calm amusement. “Some things shouldn’t be pried into casually... You used to be cautious. I think you’re starting to get a bit too cocky.”

Zhao Changhe did not argue. Whether he was being cocky or not was hard to say, but impatient, he certainly was. He could not help but admire the blind woman for how she had watched silently from the time of Xia Longyuan to now, patiently waiting for the right moment for decades.

Perhaps this was the confidence that came from being immortal. Unlike Hai Changkong, who—despite his heroic bearing—had lost the belief that he could progress further by the age of fifty, even abandoning the desire to return to the mainland. Humans were, after all, just human.

Zhao Changhe did not dwell on this and instead asked, “Do you have anything to say about the Sea Emperor?”

“No.” The blind woman’s tone was indifferent. “The world doesn’t revolve around you. There are plenty of other things worth watching.”

“Like the battle between Hai Pinglan and the Sea Emperor? Isn’t the Sea Emperor a bit slow? It seems like all he does is send a few constructs to handle things, never really doing anything himself. We killed a bunch of those lousy fishmen earlier, and he still hasn’t reacted.”

“Just wait and see. While no one takes you seriously yet, you can afford to be complacent for a few more days.”

“Even if you casually try to make me feel the pressure, I’m still going to see Shelly and let you down.”

The blind woman: “...”

“Was that why you had Lai Qi interrupt us earlier? You getting anxious?”

“...Not my problem.”

With that, the blind woman went silent, her heart oddly unsettled. She finally understood how all those people Zhao Changhe had interrogated must have felt over the past two years.

He often did not have concrete evidence, yet his intuition was uncannily sharp.

Meanwhile, Zhao Changhe had already opened the door and walked into the cabin.

Once the others went to move the cannons, Lady Three returned to the room early. She was leaning against the window, holding two of the crystals, lost in thought.

But from her distant gaze, it was unclear if she was focused on the crystals or daydreaming.

Zhao Changhe sat beside her.

“What are you thinking about?”

Lady Three came back to herself, smiling brightly. “Not much... I was just thinking that despite being a formidable expert at the third layer of the Profound Mysteries, I still feel like I can’t compare to Hai Changkong.”

“How so?”

“I once said that when the Night Emperor descends, Xia Longyuan and Hai Pinglan will realize that their so-called empires are just hollow dreams.” Lady Three leaned back in her chair, tossing the two crystals in her hand. “But now I’m thinking, why did I never consider showing them that truth myself?”

“So now you’re thinking about doing it?”

“Nope.” Lady Three stretched lazily. “When I think about it, it just feels exhausting. I’d rather just sleep.”

Seeing Zhao Changhe’s frustrated expression, the blind woman nearly laughed out loud.

So much for your attempt at guiding her—feeling hopeless, aren’t you?

And then she saw Zhao Changhe pull Lady Three into an embrace. “That’s why you’re my favorite. You’re always adorable with this carefree attitude of yours...”

With a flick of her sleeve, the blind woman left in exasperation.

Chapter 569: The Little Pig Turns Out to be the Big Bad Wolf

In the end, Lady Three's low mood did not last for more than an hour. Once she decided it was better to just sleep, her mood suddenly improved.

When Zhao Changhe held her close, she no longer kept up the pretense of a lofty venerable anymore, no longer insisting on being the one to tease him. Instead, she allowed herself to relax lazily in his embrace.

After all, this man was incredibly dependable. With him around, she could take a break. She did not need to think too hard or even fight all that fiercely. Everything always seemed to turn out just fine in the end.

Once everything was settled, wasn't it only right to relax and enjoy some leisure time? What was the point of overthinking?

Zhao Changhe loved holding her, too. Among all his close companions, Lady Three had a particular softness about her. Holding her was especially comfortable. At times like this, she was not the formidable Shelly; she was more like a cat.

Lady Three picked up a piece of fruit and turned to feed it to Zhao Changhe. "You reek of alcohol. Try smelling a bit more pleasant."

Zhao Changhe bit into it with a little surprise, "Mango!"

Lady Three raised an eyebrow. "You've had it before? Has the Tang Clan's trade become so extensive? Oh, right, you seemed familiar with that coconut before, too. Are you the one from the sea, or am I?"

Zhao Changhe laughed. "It was you who taught me all of this in my dreams."

Lady Three's eyes twinkled, a teasing smile forming on her lips. "Is that really how you won the hearts of your lovers—with such corny lines?"

"Well, with lines that corny, I still managed to win over Venerable Black Tortoise." Zhao Changhe dropped the pretense and let his hands wander.

At first, Lady Three seemed like she wanted to resist, but she was too lazy to move. By the time she processed the situation, he had already made his move. Resigned, she muttered, "Fine, I'll allow it this time since you've earned it."

She had said those same words many times before. As Zhao Changhe kept "earning" more, the rewards had become routine, so much so that they now felt perfectly natural.

As he continued, Lady Three let out a faint sigh. "Alright, that's enough... Are you having fun, playing like a child?"

"If I were like a child, I wouldn't just be playing. I'd be wanting a bite."

Lady Three gently cradled his head. "Alright, alright~"

If this continues, I might actually want it...

She feared that if she truly wanted more, he would not be able to keep up. Considering his situation, she gently changed the topic. "During the fight earlier, my ribs were still bothering me... it hurts."

"Let me take a look." Zhao Changhe lifted her onto his lap, his hands circling to her side, gently massaging her ribs.

The Rejuvenation Art surged through him, channeling into her bones.

The Rejuvenation Art was a technique at the level of the fundamental laws—it was more than just a matter of infusing true qi. From the very beginning, Zhao Changhe's spirit could not fully support it, and his understanding was not quite enough to grasp its depths. During their time stranded on the island, Zhao Changhe had recovered physically, but his spirit was exhausted, preventing the Rejuvenation Art from reaching its full potential. But now, with his soul sea restored, the Rejuvenation Art naturally worked as it should.

Though it might not be strong enough to mend a full fracture instantly, it was perfect for the final stages of recovery. Lady Three's ribs visibly mended, becoming as smooth and flawless as jade. No trace of the injury remained as his treatment was more effective than any medicine.

Lady Three let out a soft moan. The sensation of her bones healing was both painful and ticklish. It was truly peculiar.

A Tang Clan sailor passing by outside the cabin kept his head down and quickened his steps. The sounds coming from inside the cabin were quite... peculiar...

Lady Three quietly assessed the strength in her body, finding herself fully recovered. Due to her study of the crystals, she even felt a little stronger than before she got injured.

The old saying was that it took a hundred days to heal a bone injury, especially in a place with limited medical resources. Yet here she was, fully healed after barely ten days.

But to Lady Three, these past days had felt unusually long. It was her first time being this vulnerable, relying so closely on a man. Her first time being truly dependent on someone.

Now, she was fully recovered—able to easily beat Zhao Changhe to a pulp if she wanted. And yet, she still allowed herself to be held, indulging in his touch. She even adjusted her position slightly to make it more comfortable for him. It was almost as if her strength had returned for nothing.

Is this what Vermillion Bird felt as well?

Reflecting on ten days ago, it felt like a lifetime had passed.

Wait... he's playing with them again...

Zhao Changhe kissed her neck. "Feeling better now? Does it still hurt?"

Lady Three squirmed slightly, feeling ticklish from the kisses. She could not help but smile. "Hey... Did you use the Rejuvenation Art, exhausting half of your soul energy, just so that you can continue playing?"

"What do you think?"

Lady Three bit her lower lip. "Enough already... What's so fun about this anyway?"

"Don't you already know how fun it is?" Zhao Changhe whispered. "We have a long, boring journey ahead of us. What could be more fun than this?"

Lady Three did not respond, her heart slightly stirred by his words.

The setting now was unlike before. They had a warm cabin, soft bedding, clean and cozy, with a faint floral scent in the air. Outside, the sea lapped gently against the hull, devoid of the earlier

storm's fury. The storm was gone, replaced with a lazy, relaxed mood. It was as if she had weathered the storm, and now, in his embrace, she felt the most secure she had ever been.

The turmoil within her—the matters of family, the cult, grudges, beliefs, and uncertainty—all blended together. It was not that she felt nothing but rather that she forced herself to abandon her worries.

In his embrace, it seemed possible to forget it all, to banish all her worries.

Half in a daze, Lady Three felt Zhao Changhe's hand tilt her chin slightly to the side—his actions possessive. She turned obediently, only for her lips to be captured in a deep, unrestrained kiss.

For no reason, Lady Three felt a faint twinge of embarrassment. I am still a venerable, right?

Yet that thought quickly evaporated as the emotions quickly broke through her defenses, like an electric current that made her feel as if she was drifting among the clouds.

Suddenly, she realized that despite their closeness in the past—whether stranded on the island or sharing a bed in Lai Qi's quarters—this was their first real moment of intimacy.

There were no more excuses, no more pretense, no more playing around. This was a pure, unguarded exchange of emotions between a man and a woman.

At some point, her dignified robes had come slightly undone.

Lady Three instinctively felt something was wrong and placed her hand to stop her clothes from falling.

His hand paused as well. Silence filled the air, with only the relentless rhythm of the waves and the quickened breathing of the two caught in a haze of emotion.

His voice whispered in her ear, "Lady Three..."

Lady Three drowsily responded, "Hmm?"

Zhao Changhe's voice was low, almost pleading, "Is now still not the time...?"

Time for what? She thought sarcastically. As if you've ever been capable before...

She bit her lip, teasing him, "If you dare, then go ahead... Hmph, acting like you can really do it."

She even shifted slightly, teasingly offering herself. "Go on, then."

But the moment she settled back down, Lady Three's eyes widened in shock.

What is that?!

Truth be told, despite all their earlier flirtations, Zhao Changhe had never had much of a reaction. There was a reason for that—he had been physically and mentally exhausted for quite a while. Everything he did required sheer willpower, and there simply had not been much left for anything else.

But this moment was different. They were both in a much better state now.

Lady Three's heart pounded as if it would leap out of her chest. She gasped, "Wait, wait, this isn't—mmph..."

Her lips were sealed once again, whatever protests she had muffled back into incoherent sounds.

Her eyes widened, dazed and bewildered, as if she had forgotten she was far stronger than him and could easily break free. A lifetime of training seemed to have slipped away in this instant.

The blind woman put a hand to her forehead.

Initially, Zhao Changhe had not been this impulsive. No matter how many opportunities arose before, he had always held himself back. He was not someone consumed by lust. He had chances with Xia Chichi, with Tang Wanzhuang, yet for one reason or another, he refrained each time. It was the same with Lady Three earlier—given her rib injury, she clearly could not handle anything too strenuous.

Lady Three's mind was reeling. She had no strength to resist and perhaps no real desire to.

The blind woman could almost feel the flood of emotions surging within Lady Three. It was a tide that no one could hold back. It was like trying to sever a stream with a blade, only for the water to flow more freely. Well... In all fairness, it was also her own doing.

From the window came a sudden, sharp intake of breath, followed by a low groan and the sight of blood.

The blind woman left in frustration.

This idiotic love cult—at least other places make you pay!

Meanwhile, the couple, oblivious to the dramatic thoughts of their unseen spectator, were in their own world. Lady Three clutched Zhao Changhe's shoulder, panting for a long while before she angrily bit him. "Liar!"

"When have I ever lied to you?" Zhao Changhe whispered close to her ear. "It's you who's been lying, and to yourself, no less. From the moment I became your little pig, wasn't the entire point of it to... well, get dirty?"

Lady Three was momentarily speechless.

She could not even recall if Zhao Changhe had come up with this "little pig" idea or if she had just invented it on a whim to amuse herself back then.

Now, the joke was all on her.

Zhao Changhe picked her up and whispered in her ear, "Venerable, are you ready now?"

Lady Three braced herself against the windowsill, biting her lip as she looked back at him with a hint of grievance. "If you let up even the slightest, I swear I'll charge you with dereliction of duty!"

Chapter 570: Who Among Us is Prettier

The oars churned through the waves, splashing rhythmically against the sea, harmonizing with the natural pulse of the ocean.

Beneath a fiery sky, a giant tortoise loomed in the water, its head raised toward the heavens. Across the horizon, clouds alight with sunset seemed to form a vermillion bird in flight.

If a sailor had witnessed this sight, they might be reminded of the formidable Four Idols Cult, namely the blazing Vermillion Bird and the enigmatic Black Tortoise. According to rumors the cult deliberately spread, both of these figures had broken through to the third layer of the Profound Mysteries and were each now a force worthy of the Ranking of Heaven.

The news sent shockwaves through the world. After all, which other force could claim to have two individuals on the Ranking of Heaven?

It was as if twin stars had ignited, and the balance of the world tilted toward the demonic, suppressing the forces of righteousness.

But to the blind woman, these two were nothing worth praising.

Vermillion Bird, for all her fearsome reputation, still fell for a young man, while Black Tortoise was even more hopeless.

At least Vermilion Bird still kept up appearances, refusing to entangle herself with the young man as her true self. Instead, she pretended to be an unassuming member of the cult, someone whose liaison with the “little pig” seemed almost fated. As long as she maintained her pride as Vermillion Bird, Zhao Changhe could not really claim her. It meant the cult still took precedence in her heart.

But Black Tortoise? She did not care for such things. If it felt good, it was good. She had no concern for pride, no concern for appearances.

The first time, she played the scholar. But now? She played the seductress.

And when she turned her head back, hand resting on the ship’s rail, the allure in her eyes even made the blind woman shiver.

Despite her eccentricities, even the blind woman had to admit that Lady Three was an indisputable beauty. And in moments like these, as she radiated charm like a blooming rose, enough to make anyone's pulse quicken.

The blind woman chose to look away—after all, she was “blind.”

Nothing worth seeing here, she thought, or someone might say I was watching even when I shouldn't.

As she departed, she overheard Lady Three say something unexpected, taking on the role that Vermilion Bird had refused, “Don't forget to use the dual cultivation technique while you're at it.”

Never had she seen someone offer themselves up like that.

The vital yin has always been an essential part of dual cultivation, especially when one of the yin side was of a higher cultivation level—it was like a divine elixir for the recipient. Back then, Zhao Changhe's meteoric rise from an unremarkable talent to the top of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was not just due to the trials he faced on the Grasslands. A key factor had been his dual cultivation with Yue Hongling, whose perfectly timed vital yin allowed him to glimpse the Profound Mysteries.

And now Zhao Changhe was at the second layer, while Lady Three was at the third.

Once the dual cultivation technique was in play, the exchange of powerful, pure energy flowed back and forth, making Zhao Changhe feel like he was immersed in Black Tortoise's jelly-like essence, absorbing energy endlessly.

Is this the essence of the Black Tortoise?

The progress that would have normally taken him several years of careful cultivation seemed to be completed within an hour—his “experience bar” visibly filling up. The spiral of true qi and vicious qi within him became denser, like a coiling dragon, bursting with power and giving him an almost tangible sense of breaking through his limits.

It was the union of body and soul, the merging of life and destiny, pointing toward something beyond.

The threshold of the third layer of the Profound Mysteries seemed just within reach. It no longer seemed to be some distant horizon but rather something almost tangible, almost within his grasp.

* * *

“Damn you, I fell right into your trap, you little scoundrel.”

Afterward, Lady Three lay naked across the soft, fragrant bedding, utterly drained. She did not even want to lift a finger.

She had once thought he had issues in that area—but no, it was actually quite the opposite. Compared to him, all other men had issues.

It had started in the afternoon, not long after a hearty meal. Now, it was night, and Lady Three found herself wondering if she was dehydrated. Her voice was hoarse, and she had no idea if Tang En and the others had tried to call them for dinner or if everything that happened inside the cabin had been overheard, the thought of which mortified her.

In any case, she was unwilling to do anything now. Nothing sounded better than just lying down and resting.

Seeing her sprawled out like this caused Zhao Changhe to chuckle. Often, Lady Three gave him a sense of familiarity, like someone from his modern life—just a laid-back, down-to-earth woman, content to laze around, watch the world go by, and have some fun. When she tried to act like an authoritative leader, it always felt a bit like an adorable pet trying to be fierce. She felt very much unlike Vermillion Bird, whose sharp gaze could genuinely make him break into a cold sweat.

Earlier, he thought that her bold and fearless pirate persona did not quite match her usual self. But now, watching her, he saw that it all fit perfectly. She was just a free-spirited woman, someone who could grab a jug of wine, sit down next to you, and laugh without restraint.

He preferred her like this. He found himself really happy seeing her relaxed, not burdened by the weight of past grudges or lost in those moments of troubled introspection.

Zhao Changhe put his clothes back on, sat beside her, and gave her a playful pat, which sent a ripple through her soft flesh.

Lady Three shot him a fiery glare. “You dare hit me now, huh?”

“No, no.” He reached out to smooth her disheveled hair, speaking gently. “Want me to get you something to eat?”

“No. Tired.”

“How about I lift you up?”

“Get lost.”

Zhao Changhe walked over to the table, picked up a small piece of mango, and held it near her lips. “Say ahh~.”

Lady Three immediately extended her neck, took the mango into her mouth, and then gave a little huff before flopping back down.

“So, did I do my job well?” Zhao Changhe grinned.

Lady Three gave a lazy, satisfied hum. “You did alright... Keep up the good work in the future.”

After a moment’s thought, she added, “And remember the hierarchy in our cult...”

Zhao Changhe thought she was going to start playing her role again and was about to show her who was in charge when she continued, “From now on, give me your full effort. Your Qing’er should only get half the effort, got it?”

Zhao Changhe: “???”

Suddenly, Lady Three rolled over, tugging at his sleeve. “Tell me, was it better with me or with your Qing’er?”

Zhao Changhe groaned, covering his face. “Why don’t you ask who’s prettier? Who even asks that kind of question?”

“Oh? Who’s prettier, then?”

“...” Zhao Changhe wanted to slap himself. “You’re both equally pretty... equally beautiful.”

Lady Three grabbed Zhao Changhe by the collar, her eyes glinting as she gritted her teeth. “You get what you want, and suddenly you can’t even give me a simple compliment? She’s not even here. Would it kill you to just say I’m prettier than her?!”

Zhao Changhe was not about to badmouth Huangfu Qing behind her back. If she found out, he would never hear the end of it. Instead, he gave a sheepish smile. “But I’m telling the truth...”

“Can’t you tell that I don’t want to hear the truth right now?”

“...”

“Men are all the same.” Lady Three huffed and turned away, showing him her bare back. “If I don’t get a satisfactory answer, you can forget about touching me for the rest of the trip.”

Zhao Changhe sighed, exasperated. “You’re the dignified Venerable Black Tortoise. Why would you bother comparing yourself with a subordinate...”

Where he could not see, Lady Three’s eyes were full of mischief, glinting with a sly determination. “You’re right. That girl is ugly, weak, and dumb. There’s really nothing to compare. How about this then—between me and the saintess, who’s more beautiful?”

Zhao Changhe blinked. “What?”

“What’s wrong? Can’t answer that either?”

“No, I mean... Xia Chichi is only the saintess of the Azure Dragon and White Tiger branches, not the whole cult. Her rank isn’t as high as yours—there’s no need to compare.”

“Don’t you know she’s being treated as the future cult leader? Do you think I rushed here just because Vermilion Bird told me to do so? No. I came here to support the saintess, to see if she truly deserves to lead the Four Idols Cult.”

“Uh...” In all honesty, Zhao Changhe wanted to say that so far, Lady Three really had not shown much interest in assisting Xia Chichi. She had never even mentioned her, after all. But she was probably right; finding the pirates was part of finding their intended destination. Becoming a major player herself was an unexpected twist for Lady Three.

Lady Three’s eyes glinted with amusement as she looked over her shoulder. “So, in a comparison between her and me, it’s fair to say we’re evenly matched, isn’t it?”

Zhao Changhe felt as if his spirit had just taken a hard blow. He could only mutter vaguely, “Chichi is young, but she doesn’t have the same allure that you do...”

Basically, he was still saying they each had their strengths. Xia Chichi was young and vibrant... Lady Three knew it, and even though she could hear the evasive nature of his words, she still nodded, pretending to be satisfied. “Alright, I’ll accept that.”

Zhao Changhe had barely breathed a sigh of relief when Lady Three flicked her fingers, producing a floating sphere of water. The surface of the water shimmered, showing an image of his earlier expression, complete with a sheepish grin along with his exact words, “Chichi is young, but she doesn’t have the same allure that you do...” His voice rang out clearly, the tone unmistakable.

Zhao Changhe stared at it, aghast. “What... is that?”

His first thought was not “this world is becoming more magical by the day.” Nope. It was “if Chichi sees this, I am dead.”

Lady Three turned back with a gleeful grin. “It’s a secret art I just figured out, the Water Mirror Technique. Do you want to learn it? Too bad, I’m not teaching you.”

Only then did Zhao Changhe truly realize what she was doing. It’s just like the Sea Emperor’s ability to summon water constructs. This is no longer within the realm of martial arts; it’s immortal magic!