

T. Times 31

Chapter 31: Summer Sun Rises

When Zhao Changhe saw Fang Buping, the latter was in a room filled with a medicinal scent. Its four walls were completely sealed off, and the branch master's face was pale and quite gloomy. However, his days were free and easy. At this moment, he was lying in the fragrant embrace of a soft and delicate maid as she fed him his medicine spoon by spoon. There was even another maid by the side fanning a brazier; the room was nice and warm.

Around Fang Buping there were also a few disciples. Zhao Changhe reckoned that they were his trusted left and right-hand men. They were drinking warm wine and giggling as they each held a maid in their arms.

Looking at such a scene, Zhao Changhe knew that even if Fang Buping hadn't been injured, he would have passed his days like this all the same. That was why Instructor Sun thought that once one reached a certain position, they would not necessarily be as diligent as before.

Zhao Changhe walked over with a smile and cupped his fists. "Branch Master, how is your health?"

Fang Buping, weak and without strength, raised his head from the bosom of the maid. A morose envy flashed across his eyes.

He was well and truly angry. It was enough that Zhao Changhe had stolen Luo Zhenwu from under his nose, but now even the treasure they were looking for had been snatched up by him and Luo Qi. Not only that, the whole debacle had made him seem useless. It was like Zhao Changhe was specially going against him. Fang Buping knew that even though Zhao Changhe's backer could not necessarily assist, he could not bully the young man as he wished. Who knew if the saintess would take revenge for Zhao Changhe in the future?

However, Fang Buping could not entirely restrain himself.

Fucking hell. That backer of his managed to reach heaven with a single step by stealing the treasure from me.

This was what fueled the flames of his envy.

On the other hand, Zhao Changhe was unconcerned. You don't dare to do anything other than take away our money and grain. What're you gonna do in your sorry state?

Seeing that Zhao Changhe was very polite in showing his concern for him, Fang Buping forced a smile. "I'm not dead. Stronghold Master Zhao..."

"Yes, sir,"

"You're a wanted fugitive, yet you still left your post without valid reason and entered the city. If you trouble the cult while it's preaching, how will you take responsibility?" Fang Buping said slowly, "I know you're an ignorant village bumpkin that made a name for himself as a bandit. For the time being, I won't haggle you about this. But in the future, you should ask more frequently for instructions and report to us. Do not act on your own."

Wang Dashan stood by the side and felt that his heart was about to jump out of his throat. He was afraid that Zhao Changhe would lose his temper and immediately cut down Fang Buping.

We're surrounded by a bunch of Blood God Cult disciples. If you kill him, we'll all die in the ensuing fighting...

However, Zhao Changhe merely smiled and spoke without much thought. "There are many ignorant village bumpkins that make a name for themselves as bandits."

There was a slight change in Fang Buping's expression and he recalled that Xia Chichi and Zhao Changhe basically came from the same background. Mocking Zhao Changhe was not much different from mocking Xia Chichi... Zhao Changhe having a backer did not matter anymore, if the Four Idols Cult found out about Fang Buping slandering their saintess, there would be hell to pay.

As he thought this, he quickly put on a smile. "You'll still need to study. Stronghold Master Zhao, have you read our cult's sacred texts? Since you're here, you should take a few back to study."

"Of course." Zhao Changhe smiled warmly. "Other than the cult's sacred text, I wish to take back a few history books to read. Oh right, and I believe I should be qualified to learn the movement arts of our holy faith?"

"We're all brothers of the cult. Naturally, you are qualified to do so." Despite acting diffident, Fang Buping did not dare stir up anything and weakly waved his hand. "Liuzi, bring our guest to the

study. For the movement art, take the Traceless Soaring Blood. Take the scripture and history books by yourself.”

The disciple that had brought Zhao Changhe inside saluted him. “Please follow me, Stronghold Master Zhao.”

Zhao Changhe nodded with a smile. “Thank you, brother.”

Wang Dashan felt like he was in a dream. Is this really Zhao Changhe?

No. Aren’t you here to get money and grain? You’re acting like everyone is on good terms. You haven’t even brought up the money. How are you going to get it?

The study was located right beside the bedroom Fang Buping was resting in. Zhao Changhe followed the disciple inside and sized up the bookshelf. The door was open and, even from afar, Fang Buping could see Zhao Changhe.

Fang Buping had a gloomy look on his face as he watched Zhao Changhe from behind. He shot a glance at Wang Dashan, and asked coldly, “Zhao Changhe braved the danger of getting arrested to enter the city. What exactly is he planning?”

Wang Dashan shivered as Fang Buping’s icy gaze landed on him. How could he lie to the branch master? With care, he laughed apologetically. “The stronghold is out of money and grain.”

“As expected.” Fang Buping laughed coldly.

When it came to anything related to the martial arts of the cult, it was difficult for Fang Buping to hinder Zhao Changhe. However, the distribution of money and grain was under his complete jurisdiction. Zhao Changhe could not say anything about it. If he did, then he would be met with a sharp rebuff.

Fang Buping said indifferently, “You are Wang Dashan?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Whatever happens in the stronghold, report it to the branch... Anyone that can help us find out more about the stronghold master...”

Wang Dashan’s eyes lit up and he smiled obsequiously. “Please—please watch over me, branch master.”

Fang Buping laughed, closed his eyes, and did not speak.

Zhao Changhe, who looked like he was sizing up the bookshelf, grinned.

Indeed, not everyone is like Luo Qi. This Wang Dashan really can’t be relied upon.

“Stronghold Master Zhao, are you done looking?” Liuzi presented a stack of books to him.

Zhao Changhe flipped through them and once he saw one titled Traceless Soaring Blood, he smiled. “That’s enough. Thank you, brother.”

He carried the stack of books and walked out unhurriedly. He rushed to Fang Buping as if he just recalled something. “I’ve come here today for another matter as well. I wish to discuss it with you.”

Fang Buping said indifferently, “What matter?”

“I heard from a brother in the cult that our holy faith prides itself on its martial bearing where strength is king. Positions in the cult can be challenged for as long as the challenge is honorable and there is evidence of it taking place. Is this true?”

Fang Buping could not see what Zhao Changhe was implying. “Our holy faith certainly has this rule.”

Then, he immediately understood and broke out in laughter. “Don’t tell me that you wish to challenge me for the position of branch master, Stronghold Master Zhao? The rules of the cult state that you may not take advantage of someone being injured and challenge them. Otherwise, there would be no order. If this is what you wish for, stronghold master, we can discuss this in a few months.”

“How could I? I have my own face to maintain. How could I have the nerve to challenge someone who can’t even get out of bed?” Zhao Changhe’s smile slowly faded away and he declared loudly. “However, I’m quite interested in the position of vice branch master, the one responsible for the distribution of money and grain. With you brothers of the sect present, and with Branch Master Fang present, I, Zhao Changhe, challenge the vice branch master for your position. Do you accept?”

The expressions of all the disciples present warped and Wang Dashan’s face had gone pale.

This Zhao Changhe...

Even though all the elites of the sect have left, no matter the case, one still needs to at least reach the second layer of the Profound Gate to take up the role of vice branch leader. Zhao Changhe, you’ve only been training for a month. It’s only been ten or so days since you broke through to the first layer of the Profound Gate. Everyone here practices the Vicious Blood Art and you have no martial art that is effective against it, so how in the world can you be so bold?

The brave really are brave...

However, even if you win, are you really not afraid that the branch master will give you endless suffering after he recovers? The roof above your head is so low, so why are you standing so tall?

Fang Buping looked at Zhao Changhe for a long while, stupefied. He laughed sickly as he coughed. “Hey, Old Huang, did you hear what he said? Stronghold Master Zhao wants to challenge you with me as a witness. Do you accept his challenge?”

One of the men by the side, who had an intrepid physique and held a maid in his arms as he watched, stood up and smiled. “Since Stronghold Master Zhao has such a refined and elegant attitude, how can I turn him down? Haha...”

Zhao Changhe’s expression was calm. He cupped his fists with his saber in hand. “Please impart your wisdom unto me, Vice Branch Master Huang.”

Vice Branch Master Huang took out a heavy steel saber and smiled. “So that others do not think I am bullying a junior, I’ll let you have three strikes. How does that sound?”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes sparkled as they landed on that heavy steel saber. He wanted to say something but a golden glow suddenly flashed across the sky.

Everyone was stumped for words and looked up.

The Tome of Troubled times had once again descended upon them with a new page.

Twelfth month, Slight Cold[1]. Xia Chichi, at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, stepped into the pool of the Azure Dragon, comprehended the White Tiger's fangs, and fought off twenty-eight disciples of the Four Idols Cult on the same level as her, breaking out of the Great Twenty-Eight Star Constellation Array and shocking the entire Four Idols Cult.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed. Hidden Dragon Rank 13: Xia Chichi. How can the summer sun ever be late to rise?

Everyone was silent. Fang Buping and his lackeys all had astonished looks on their faces as they looked to the sky. For a while, no one said anything.

They all could guess that Xia Chichi would become the saintess, but they had never expected her to do so in such an outlandish way. While merely at the fifth layer of the Profound Gate, she was able to claim the thirteenth spot on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons out of nowhere. There were many at the sixth and seventh layer ranked behind her! This meant that either the Tome of Troubled Times considered her accomplishment impossible for those at the sixth and seventh layer, or that their achievements could not compare to hers in terms of difficulty!

Now what if you let her cultivate to the eighth layer?

Not only will she shock the entire Four Idols Cult, she'll send waves throughout the world under heaven!

Zhao Changhe sighed quietly.

She's someone who can cultivate even while sleeping... She should have long since made a name for herself rather than staying in obscurity.

How can the summer sun ever be late to rise...

He withdrew his gaze. The tip of his saber trembled slightly and he grinned. “Vice Branch Master Huang, why the cautious face... I, Zhao Changhe, have my own saber and I do not live off a woman. There’s no need to give me three attacks. I’ve taken a liking to your saber, what do you say we throw it in as an extra prize if I win?”

Chapter 32: How Can the Setting Sun Be Late to Rise

“You want this blade of mine?” Vice Branch Master Huang rattled his saber. He felt the whole thing to be a little laughable. “If you really beat me, you can have both my position and this piece of junk. But where are you getting your confidence from? Do you really believe that you’re on the same level as her just because you two lived together?”

Zhao Changhe did not argue with him and grinned. “Please impart your wisdom onto me.”

The two of them made their way to the courtyard. A group of disciples surrounded them solemnly and the atmosphere quickly became austere. Someone at the first layer of the Profound Gate fighting someone at the second layer was not uncommon. However, did this beginner, who had only been cultivating for a measly month, have the ability to battle someone of a higher cultivation?

Since Zhao Changhe dared to fight the vice branch master, he was, of course, confident in himself. He was no longer that ignorant boy who just arrived in this world.

He was deeply familiar with how low-level martial arts were at the level of the first and second layer of the Profound Gate. There was nothing fundamentally different about the two; one had more strength and could react faster, but not by much. Now that he had begun practicing internal arts, he could make up for this disparity and his adversary had no way of knowing this. This asymmetry in information made his enemy underestimate him; this would be Zhao Changhe’s key to victory.

What was difficult was finding a way to use his internal force while ensuring that the others did not notice...

Thankfully, he did not lack practice. Zhao Changhe had fought every single day in the stronghold, even with the senior disciples of the sect, until he had gained the titles “Boss Zhao” and the “Little Tyrant.” He had good experience with actual combat. Moreover, with Vice Branch Master Huang staying in the city all day doing nothing but playing with maids and drinking with women, just how much valiance could he still display?

Yue Hongling could fight those with higher cultivation and Luo Qi's name had sent shockwaves throughout the lands under heaven... If I don't dare to try, how can I meet again with them in the jianghu? I might as well go home and work on a farm!

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath. With a single step, he attacked.

His saber streaked through the few zhang[1] between him and the vice branch master. Everyone present only saw a flash; Zhao Changhe's vicious blood surged wildly as his scarlet saber reached the left side of Vice Branch Master Huang's neck.

"Such a fast saber!" A considerable number of people were terrified. "What the hell, you're telling me he's only been training for a month and he's that good?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you told me he's trained for three years..."

"Are there really such geniuses in the world? Those two even stayed in the same building..."

Vice Branch Master Huang's smirk vanished and his expression turned serious. The speed of Zhao Changhe's saber made him break out in cold sweat. The next moment, he dodged to the right and he hurriedly raised his saber to the left to block the attack. He attempted to use his second-layer cultivation to imbue his steel saber with a crushing weight and knock away Zhao Changhe's blade.

Once their blades met, it was clear for all to see that the victor had been decided.

By the side, Branch Master Fang sighed. His expression was dignified. "Old Huang has lost his edge. He shouldn't have been this passive..."

Zhao Changhe's blade, which was fast as lightning and looked unstoppable, suddenly halted in midair, while Vice Branch Master Huang's saber swung over heavily. It looked like he was trying to chop in half a massive pile of cotton.

A fraction of a second later, Zhao Changhe's blade had slid to the side of the vice branch master's saber like a slippery fish and thrust toward his wrist.

"This is one of the moves of the Vicious Blood Saber Art. But no one uses it, right?"

“The Vicious Blood Saber Art is a free and open saber art. It has some more elaborate techniques, but they don’t fit in with the rest. It takes a ridiculous amount of work to blend them in well, who the hell would practice that much?”

“Just how long has he been training?”

‘He controls his blade like it’s his own arm. Has he only been training for a month?’ As the thought surfaced in Vice Branch Master Huang’s mind, he urgently pulled back his blade.

Then, he realized that he was not just pulling back his saber; unconsciously, he was actually taking a step back himself.

Zhao Changhe grinned and kicked him straight in the gut.

There was none of the flashiness of Zhao Changhe’s saber technique just now in this kick. An unmatched, berserk vicious blood force surged forth.

Vice Branch Master Huang felt that he had cultivated the Vicious Blood Art to the second level in vain. There was no way he could muster up the same amount of power as Zhao Changhe, even though they both used the same technique and the latter had lower cultivation.

He was flung back a good few zhang. It was like he was soaring through the clouds as he smashed into the walls of the courtyard and dropped to the ground.

He coughed as he bitterly curled up on the floor. “Give...give me a Blood Settling Pill... My vicious blood qi is in a mess...”

Not one peep could be heard in the courtyard.

They all practiced the same Vicious Blood Art and the same Vicious Blood Saber Art, yet someone at the first level had just defeated someone at the second level, and in just three moves!

The Vice Branch Master could not even find the initiative to attack!

Not even Zhao Changhe had thought it would be this simple. He had not even used his internal force...

Instructor Sun was right. Practicing saber arts was indeed no less important than cultivating. Zhao Changhe had practiced every single move one thousand times, then one more thousand, and then one thousand more. His saber had now finally blossomed, and its bloom was resplendent!

Zhao Changhe pointed his saber at the branch master. “Branch Master, have I won this battle?”

Looking at Zhao Changhe, with his eyes red and full of malice from using the Vicious Blood Art staring at him, Fang Buping felt his heart skip a beat. He felt like this violent man was about to cut him down any moment.

Fang Buping took a deep breath and tightly gripped the handle of his reclining chair. “Not bad. In accordance with the rules of the cult, today, the position of vice branch master is yours.”

Zhao Changhe laughed heartily. “Good. Now that I’m the vice branch master, I have authority over how grain and money are distributed. Wang Dashan!”

Wang Dashan was scared witless. “Y—yes?”

“What’s with that voice? You’re the vice stronghold master, speak louder!” Zhao Changhe pointed in the direction of the storehouse with his saber. “Bring a few of our brothers to take three hundred taels of silver, three carts of corn, and half of the meat to support the development of the Beimang Mountain Stronghold. Act with care. Do not take everything. Leave a bit for our brothers in the city. Don’t be so miserly as to forget how to conduct yourselves.”

Fang Buping looked unwell.

Zhao Changhe strode to the wall of the courtyard and fed Vice Branch Master Huang a Blood Settling Pill. “On behalf of Cult Leader Xue, I have to manage the Beimang Mountain Stronghold well. The responsibility of distributing money and grain should still be taken up by Vice Branch Master Huang.”

In his pocket, Zhao Changhe did not just have that single Blood Settling Pill he refrained from using before. Now, he had seven to eight pills. They were secretly given to him by Instructor Sun before he left. Vice Branch Master Huang never thought that the first person to assist him would be

Zhao Changhe rather than Fang Buping. He ate the pill and remained silent for a long while before saying quietly, "Thank you. The saber is yours."

He was also a bandit, and to his merit, he acted frank and straightforward.

Zhao Changhe showed him no courtesy as he picked up his hefty steel saber. Delighted, he tested out the blade before securing it to his waist. Then, he turned around, picked up the books, and smiled at Fang Buping. "Branch master, if you have no other orders, then this is where I take my leave."

Fang Buping took a good number of deep breaths. If he had not been injured right now, he would have split Zhao Changhe in twain with no regard for the aftermath. However, he was injured to the point of being bedridden and feared that Zhao Changhe would be the one to do exactly that. Judging from the indescribable speed of Zhao Changhe's saber, even if everyone here were to try and save Fang Buping, they would not make it in time.

Fang Buping desperately tried to stifle the rage in his heart and forced himself to maintain his indifferent tone. "Stronghold Master Zhao, you are valiant. Our holy faith is fortunate to have obtained such a great general. However, since you have joined the cult, there are some rules that you need to be aware of."

Zhao Changhe said, "Please tell me about them, branch master."

"The mountain stronghold does not belong to you. It is one of the organizations of the branch in charge of obtaining riches and resources. You must always keep this in mind. Every month, the stronghold is to keep half of everything it gains, and the other half will be handed to the branch. If imperial troops or orthodox forces are about to lay siege to the stronghold, you are not to act alone and you must report to me for further orders. Stronghold Master Zhao, you must keep these matters in mind, or else you'll cause trouble for the Head Altar. If that happens, the Four Idols Cult won't swoop in to protect you. The internal administration of our Blood God Cult still has autonomy in this regard."

Zhao Changhe smiled. "I understand, naturally. Of course, if there really are imperial troops or orthodox forces coming to weed us out, I hope the branch can send reinforcements."

"Naturally" Fang Buping really did not want to see Zhao Changhe's glowing smile, and he waved his hands loathsomely. "Go now."

Zhao Changhe saw Wang Dashan and the others pushing carts from afar and waved at them. “Brothers, let’s return to the mountain!”

At the same time, golden light flashed through the sky.

It had not even been fifteen minutes since the Tome of Troubled Times had last appeared. Something like this happening was extremely rare. Practically everyone under heaven was looking up at the sky wondering just which ranking had changed.

It was the Ranking of Hidden Dragons again.

Twelfth month, Slight Cold. Zhao Changhe, at the first layer of the Profound Gate, defeated someone at the second layer within three bouts. His potential is laudable.

There is a new addition to the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. Rank 250: Zhao Changhe.

It’s over. This stupid fucking ranking thinks I’m an idiot[2]. There wasn’t even a fancy comment at the end like with Yue Hongling and Xia Chichi. It’s like the tome doesn’t even think I did anything amazing.

After all, it was a low-level battle between those at the first and second layers of the Profound Gate. Such battles were not uncommon. It was just that claiming victory in three bouts was more difficult. In reality, with what strength Zhao Changhe had now, entering the Ranking of Hidden Dragons was not good. He was not strong enough and now he had roused the envy of others. Rising stars who entered the tail bit of the ranking did not live for very long.

Most people in the world took a glance and did not care too much, but some of them felt that the name Zhao Changhe sounded a little familiar...

A thousand li away, in a secret area, Xia Chichi, who was cultivating in the lotus position, opened her eyes and looked at the sky. The corners of her mouth curved up with delight.

“Are you chasing me on the ranking to remind me of something? Are you trying to send your love through vying for rankings? Hehe.”

“To be honest, I’ve long since known that no matter how much later than me you rise, there will be a place for us in the Tome of Troubled Times shining in the sky.”

“The Ranking of Hidden Dragons isn’t the end. There are still the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man waiting for us.”

How can the setting sun be late to rise?

If Xia Chichi could do it, why not Zhao Changhe?

In some other part of the city, Yue Hongling stood atop a tall building and quietly watched Zhao Changhe ordering his subordinates to carry the resources from afar.

At that moment, Zhao Changhe’s words suddenly surfaced in her mind: “I didn’t come to this world to fool around in the countryside.”

Chapter 33: Further Onward

“For fuck’s sake. I can’t take this rank! Now the whole world knows I’m an idiot[1]! Eh, wait. I mean, everyone thinks I’m an idiot! I’m not an idiot! Fuck! What kind of shitty book is this? Is it messing with me? And what about the lines at the end? Why didn’t I get one? The tome just told the world what I did and then just up and left!”

On the road back, Zhao Changhe’s mouth was foul. He did not care about the glory of having entered the Rankings of Troubled Times, nor was he wary about potentially rousing envy in others. What he was concerned with was how unsightly his ranking was and the fact that he had not received a fancy line at the end to show off with.

Wang Dashan and the rest looked at Zhao Changhe, perplexed. They had no idea what to think of this weirdo of a boss.

How can everyone receive a line from the tome? Among the 250 people on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, only a handful ever get one. No one knew on what basis the tome wrote such lines for people. In any case, there had been cases where those given a line were killed on the next day after their ranking changed. Receiving a line did not mean anything.

Anyway, it's good enough that you got a rank... You actually managed to get on the Rankings of Troubled Times at the first fucking layer of the Profound Gate. There are many stronger than you who haven't even gotten there, and you want to complain that you're ranked 250??

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons differed from the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man. The latter ranked people based on their strength. The former was completely different.

It was a ranking for rising stars, and it looked at how much potential one showed from their achievements in battle. What it represented was that, under the same conditions, it would be difficult for other people to achieve the same result compared to someone on the ranking. In other words, what it showed was that one could expect much from such people in the future; therefore, it was called the Ranking of Hidden Dragons. It did not mean that one was among the top few hundred strongest under heaven.

Of course, it was easier to recognise one's actual skill and abilities in higher-level battles. The petty fighting between greenhorns, no matter how exquisite, did not say much about their real strength. That was why the top of the rankings was basically a ranking of how high people's cultivation was. Those with lower cultivation were naturally ranked lower. From the surface, it looked very similar to a ranking based on real strength.

A lot of people did not understand this and they all felt the same. Fuck you. Why can you enter the rankings at the first layer? Why am I not there when I'm at the third layer? I don't even know how many people are stronger than you, so why should you be ranked 250!? If I beat you up, then the ranking will be mine, right?

This was why entering the rankings attracted a lot of trouble to one's doorstep. Why else would it be called the Tome of Troubled Times?

This Zhao Changhe is upset over a number. Do you have no idea about this stuff or do you just really not care... Also, I'm sure you feel good about getting the branch master to spit out money and grains for us. but that's because he was injured and couldn't do shit, so he had to compromise. In a few months, when he recovers, I wonder how you're gonna die.

Wang Dashan and the rest all felt their days were going to be hard.

Whatever the case, they returned and put the things in the storehouse. There were now grains to eat and the bandits did not care where they came from or what future problems could arise from this. Every one of them cheered "Long live Boss Zhao!" like it was the new year.

Zhao Changhe held his chin as he cheered on.

Naturally, he was well aware that this was not a long-term solution.

The multiple carts of grain looked plentiful, and the amount of things they could purchase with a few hundred taels of silver was not a joke. They could purchase a considerable amount of resources to support themselves. Even so, if Zhao Changhe was to feed a stronghold with a few hundred people, these resources would not last for long. That was why even though they had reserves in the storehouse, the stronghold still required people to go out to hunt or loot. Otherwise, they would eventually have to start eating into their reserves.

Strongholds needed resources, and those resources usually came from looting. Zhao Changhe did not want to rob people, but he also could not avoid the problem.

The few times Zhao Changhe had seen the Tome of Troubled Times, it had shown the date as well. This time it was Light Cold, and it reminded people that there were only twenty days or so until the spring festival. Spring was coming...

The coming of spring meant that the situation where people could not be found on the road which had lasted for one to two months was about to rapidly change. The number of travelers and merchants passing through the mountain would slowly increase. There might even be people on the road right now. I'm not sure if people in this world have the custom of rushing home to celebrate the new year. Even if not many follow this practice, some probably do, right?

“Boss, what do we do now?” In the meeting room in the stronghold, Wang Dashan stood by the side and asked, “Branch Master Fang was correct. The branch doesn't produce anything, and they actually rely on us to help with resources. We can't keep getting money from the branch...”

Zhao Changhe leaned back on the main seat and lazily supported his forehead with his hand. “Spring is coming. There should be people passing by... Split up into groups and have our brothers set up a blockade at each of the mountain roads.”

Wang Dashan: “?”

Zhao Changhe said lazily, “I made this mountain; I planted this tree. If you want to pass, then pay up a fee. Sounds a bit crude, but...oh well. We're mountain bandits, not teachers of fine manners.”

“Isn’t that just looting?”

“I have no idea what you mean. We’re just collecting road taxes.”

“What?”

“And we’re not taking everything they have. Let’s see...I think they should pay us about as much as what we paid today to enter the city. As long as people hand us the money, they can go on their way.”

Wang Dashan said, “Boss, didn’t you say that imperial troops would come to take us down? Aren’t we doing things a bit too openly?”

“This is our own land. If imperial troops come, can’t we just run? Are you telling me they’re going to camp on the roads like idiots with nothing to show for it? In any case, we will only operate within our mountain rather than raise our banners and beat the war drums because I’ve taken this into consideration. Do you think I like doing such things as setting up tolls on public roads?”

“...”

“Oh, speaking of imperial troops. Branch Master Fang promised to send us reinforcements, but we really can’t count on it. Send a few clever men to stay in the city. The moment they catch the slightest whiff of trouble, they are to immediately report back.”

“Yes.”

“Other than that, continue sending out people to hunt. Even a little is better than nothing. Oh, right, also change the large banner in the stronghold, put up one that says ‘Carrying out the Will of Heaven.’ And in this meeting room, hang up a board that says ‘Hall of Virtuous Rebellion.’”

Wang Dashan’s eyes went wide. He did not have the slightest idea what this boss of his was thinking.

However, he felt that this boss of his really did not want to engage in looting. Day after day, he keeps delaying... I don't know if it's just me. Boss is clearly an incredibly fierce person, a natural-born bandit. How could he not want to loot and plunder? Didn't he snatch that saber of his in his hands right now from someone else?

“Enough.” Zhao Changhe stood up. “I'm going to train. All of you go to train too. Don't fucking think that you guys can slack off because Instructor Sun has left. You can forget about the imperial troops, I'll teach you myself how to write the word 'death.' Dismissed.”

After everyone was out for work, Zhao Changhe immediately headed to the medicine storehouse to concoct the auxiliary bath medicine written in the Vicious Blood Art manual.

He had absolutely no intention to develop the mountain stronghold. Indeed, he was delaying things every single day. He hid in Beimang as a mountain king because he wanted to cultivate, not because he wanted to plan a rebellion, and certainly not because of the trifling branch master's incompetency.

Is this low of me? The most obvious privilege of being a stronghold master is the qualification to snatch up a stronghold mistress... No, I mean the qualification to have the laborers heat up a medicinal bath. I'd be stupid if I didn't profit from this.

The use of medicinal baths in external arts was commonplace since it stimulated the circulation of one's qi and blood. It could also strengthen parts of one's body and make it more resistant to attacks. However, medicinal baths tended to be unbearable to soak in.

Zhao Changhe felt that Vice Branch Master Huang was unable to withstand his attacks because the man had simply not trained enough. The Vicious Blood Art usually increased the toughness of one's flesh. Even though it would not make one immune to sabers, spears, and other sharp weapons, it still granted the user some immunity to blunt weapons and other such attacks. If the vice branch master had trained properly, how could a single kick have brought him down?

The more he cultivated the Vicious Blood Art, the more Zhao Changhe felt that it was outstanding. It had a wild and overbearing offense, coupled with a pretty good defense. The reason it was considered a mediocre martial art in spite of those advantages was its grave side-effects and difficulty to cultivate. However, now that Zhao Changhe had an internal art, he no longer needed to worry about giving up his external art. He could continue practicing it.

This was cultivating both internal and external arts.

I started cultivating so damn late, so if I don't put in double the effort, then how can I surpass this ranking?!

“Sssss! For fuck's sake!” In the stronghold master's room, Zhao Changhe was soaking in a barrel of hot water, grimacing in pain. He was about to curl up and cry.

It felt like there were ten million needles poking into his flesh. It was both painful and itchy. After that, as his qi and blood started racing through him, his head got hot and a certain part of his body rose up.

Yes...uh...this medicine must be good. It definitely isn't a sham...but boy, is it fucking unbearable. It's no better than the side-effects of the Vicious Blood Art. No wonder Vice Branch Master Huang didn't feel like doing this.

Defeating Vice Master Huang with only three attacks was not something Zhao Changhe thought was commendable. A thousand ships pass by a sunken one—Vice Master Huang, at the end of the day, was someone who had his battle sense whittled away by luxury and fell behind. Zhao Changhe needed to learn from the mistakes of his predecessors if he was to avoid becoming a sunken ship.

To continue training is the way. The only way. Even if this shitty martial art becomes even shittier to cultivate, I have to continue.

Zhao Changhe gritted his teeth tightly and forcefully grabbed the sides of the barrel, bitterly supporting himself. Amidst the pain, he began channeling his qi according to the Vicious Blood Art.

There was a scratching sound as he grabbed the wooden barrel. His fingers actually left shallow marks on the wood.

Will I be able to defeat Branch Master Fang after he recovers in a few months? Zhao Changhe could not be bothered planning that far. Whatever the case, he needed to work hard.

Chapter 34: Profound Mysteries

The night was freezing.

After soaking in the medicinal bath, Zhao Changhe stood behind the building and looked at the sky.

The moon could not be seen tonight. The clouds had become thicker and thicker and tiny snowflakes had gently begun to fall. He could tell that there would be heavy snow tonight.

He realized that he had gotten used to this world despite only being here for less than two months... He was used to not having heating in his wooden hut; he was used to telling the time and predicting weather from looking at the sky; he was used to training; and he was used to the antiquated way of speaking together with the rules of the demonic dao.

He was used to the strange “server-wide announcement” that would appear in the sky.

The real world appeared less and less frequently in his mind. It was now difficult for Zhao Changhe to know whether he was so obsessed with cultivation because he wanted to go back, or because he wanted to make a name for himself in these troubled times.

Anyway, what occupied most of his brain power was cultivation and Luo Qi. Yue Hongling also flashed through his mind occasionally.

If it was not for the fact that his first experience with the jianghu was with Yue Hongling...Zhao Changhe wondered if he would have turned into a true-blue bandit. Yet, because he had met her, Zhao Changhe kept restraining his growing bandit-like tendencies. He did not want to abandon the rest of his conscience.

Otherwise, the next time they met in the jianghu...not only would he not know what to call her, their meeting would not be as calm as before.

Or perhaps we'll have nothing to do with each other...

Zhao Changhe did not want to ruin the beauty of the jianghu in his dreams with his own hands... Yue Hongling was the jianghu heroine ideal he had in his heart since he was a child, and she had actually appeared before him.

Twang!

Zhao Changhe took out his newly-won steel saber.

Now that his medicinal bath was over, it was time to practice with his saber. He did not partake in any of the labor that would make a refined youth sigh. This was enough for him.

He needed to get familiar with the weight of his newly-acquired saber and all its idiosyncrasies in order for it to become an extension of his arm. He could not randomly pick up sabers and use them blindly like in his prior dreams...

This unblemished steel saber which he just won was not as ridiculous as the broad saber from his dreams. It was a standard saber, with the spine close to a centimeter thick. The entire weapon was rather heavy, a little more than ten jin, and was incredibly suited to Zhao Changhe's present strength. The saber he used before, weighing two to three jin, wiggled like a willow branch whenever he hacked and slashed with it; there was absolutely no force behind the attacks. It was no longer appropriate for his use.

This was especially so since the Vicious Blood Saber Art was a free and wild saber art. One needed a heavy saber like this to be able to display its full power. It was a pity that sabers like this usually cost a fortune. There was no way Zhao Changhe could buy something like it with what he had before.

Zhao Changhe was not an expert at appraising the material and craftsmanship behind the saber, but he could clearly feel a hostility and sharpness radiating from it. It was far superior to his old, worn out saber. A weapon like this cost a few dozen taels of silver—by comparison, the cash reserves of the mountain stronghold only amounted to three hundred taels in total. The cost of that one saber could feed the stronghold for a good while.

Zhao Changhe felt reluctant to put down the saber as he played with it. He found it more fun than teasing Luo Qi.

Indeed, a warrior's fate was tied to a good weapon.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

The saber flashed in the dead of night, brighter than the moonlight.

As the snow got bigger, the people in the stronghold all hid in their huts. There was not a sound to be heard other than the swooshing coming from the stronghold master's building as it mingled with the howling of the mournful north winds. It was hard to tell which was colder.

If the people at the branch master's courtyard today, who had gasped in awe at the genius Zhao Changhe, could see this right now, they would know that he was no genius...

Only Xia Chichi understood that, while other people rested, he was training with the saber.

His training, though, was a little different now.

Swish!

Amidst the snow, his figure shot up into the air and stepped on a tree trunk, bringing up rustling snow with him. He mustered up even more strength and drifted to another tree branch.

Kacha!

The highest branch of a ten-meter tall-tree fell under his saber.

His hand scraped the falling branch as he landed gently on the ground.

Zhao Changhe heaved a sigh and looked behind. He had a pleasant expression on his face. "Movement arts are really interesting. I have something I can show off with now. My gains this time around are pretty big... Next time shall I confer upon Fang Buping the honor of being in charge with my logistics?"

Traceless Soaring Blood was considered a relatively high-level movement art in the Blood God Cult. The reason Fang Buping was so willing to give away such a good art was not that he was generous. He still had schemes he was hiding. It was due to the fact that one needed to have decent internal force to be able to use it. Fang Buping wanted Zhao Changhe to feel what it was like to be in the presence of a remarkable beauty while figuring out he was impotent.

However, not only was Zhao Changhe not impotent, but on the contrary, he was a fierce man. His internal force had already reached a high level. Even if his cultivation in internal arts was not yet at the first layer of the Profound Gate, he was on the verge of breaking through.

*

Even until now, Zhao Changhe did not know the name of this internal art he had inherited from Xia Longyuan. For now, he did not care too much and called it the Xia Family Internal Art.

This internal art was also the type that could be cultivated lying down and standing up. It did not require him to meditate in a lotus position and be one with the universe—that was the stuff of daoists. However, it did require him to be attentive and tranquil. He needed to calmly perform internal observation and guide his qi, otherwise his life would be in danger if his qi was sent into disarray.

Compared to Luo Qi's internal art, which literally allowed her to cultivate in her sleep, this internal art looked no good. However, once Zhao Changhe reached a high enough level with it, he reckoned it would allow him to forgo sleep entirely. There would be no difference then.

It all comes down to saving time... There's too much to learn. I really wish my days could be twice as long.

Zhao Changhe sat down quietly on the bed and carefully did his internal observation. Without realizing it, the image of Luo Qi lying on the bed watching him practice with his saber flashed through his head.

It was as if he was experiencing what Luo Qi experienced back then... Unfortunately, there was no exchange of roles; there was no beautiful woman practicing with a saber outside for him to watch.

From the time he obtained the Xia Family Internal Art until now, it had not even been ten days and he was already on the verge of breaking through. Of course, it was not because he was a genius. Xia Longyuan's qi allowed him to skip the phase of getting a feel for the flow of qi in his body.

Other than that, internal and external arts naturally progressed faster when cultivated simultaneously.

People who had better constitutions, who spent each and every day training their fists and swinging their weapons, naturally had less clogged up meridians and acupoints. qi could more easily flow through their bodies. One would not trust any sickly person if they said they could cultivate internal arts well. On the other hand, miraculous qi could alter one's body, give them more strength, and boost their blood flow.

Whether it was internal or external arts, they both developed the body.

That was why, no matter how much time someone spent training, whether it was through cultivating or with real combat, practicing both internal and external arts had always been the way of kings. It was far more advantageous than practicing only one.

There was a saying that internal and external arts achieved the same result once trained to a high level. This was related to how one would reach the body's Profound Mysteries after breaking through all nine layers of the Profound Gate. At present, Zhao Changhe did not have what it took to experience what that level felt like, but he felt that even though cultivating in such a way was time consuming, it bore good results.

The fact that Zhao Changhe's qi acted by itself to soothe the effects of the medicine was enough to make practicing both internal and external arts worth it.

It was just that he had not discovered anything mystical about his body at the moment. Must be because my cultivation is too shallow... Today, I'll try to break through the Profound Gate for internal arts. Once I do that, will I be able to discover the mysteries of internal arts?

Zhao Changhe felt a little shameful thinking about the Profound Gate for internal arts.

This was because, technically speaking, this Profound Gate referred to the Huiyin acupoint, located in the space between one's anus and genitals... So to break through to the first layer of the profound gate was to open this acupoint.

As he directed his qi and had it rush downward, it felt like he was giving himself a blowjob...

He did not know what Luo Qi or Yue Hongling thought when they cultivated, but they were probably not as bored as him to think up these things.

Opening a Profound Gate was really painful. For many people, once they felt pain, it was difficult to focus and circulate their qi. That was why this was a bottleneck. It was a good thing that this was an orthodox internal art—the pain was on an incredibly normal level. After experiencing the baptism of the Vicious Blood Art, Zhao Changhe felt that this pain was like being bitten by a mosquito. It did not affect him at all. After he increased his strength and struck the gate a few dozen more times, he broke through.

Zhao Changhe could feel a coolness spread out from the Profound Gate and seep into his four limbs. Even his spirit began to quiver and became considerably keener. The wisp of Xia Longyuan's qi could no longer be felt. It had completely been refined into his own qi and continued to slowly circulate around the path it had followed before. It was calm and vast, like there was a star chart unfolding in his body with a moon bathing his dantian in light and his acupoints shining resplendently like stars.

He slowly opened his eyes.

There was no light in the room. It was completely dark. Previously, his Back Eye would have had trouble making out details in the room even with its night vision capabilities. However, at this moment, Zhao Changhe realized he could see everything clearly.

Even the patterns of the wood on the walls could be clearly distinguished.

His hearing had also improved. There was not supposed to be any sound as the snow fell to the ground outside, but now, Zhao Changhe could hear them rustle and quieten down.

“My vision and hearing are both better.” That was his first reaction.

His second reaction was his heart skipping a beat. Why do I feel like the Back Eye's increase in effect feels similar to breaking through the Profound Gate for internal arts? Moreover, after I broke through, it seems like I can still strengthen the effects of the Back Eye. Don't tell me that this Back Eye is unlocked once people reach a certain layer? Then which layer allows people to look behind them?

Zhao Changhe could not sit down. He stood up and flipped through the books he brought back during the day. One of them was the sacred text of the Blood God Cult. It naturally contained explanations on the Profound Gate and Profound Mysteries of the body from the perspective of the Blood God Cult.

Those who have reached the Profound Mysteries have divine powers.

When ordinary people break through the Profound Gate, they open the aperture of their eyes and can see further and clearer, down to the smallest detail. Only with the divine powers of the Profound Mysteries can one see what is happening behind them and see ten thousand li far; they can see the sadness and joy of the mortal world; they can pry into the workings of the heavenly dao. None of the happenings of the world escape their sight. This is called the heavenly eye.

Our Blood God Cult blah blah...

Zhao Changhe was not in the mood to read how the Blood God Cult bragged about itself...

The heavenly eye...

Before, Zhao Changhe had mainly used it as a hack to peep on people showering. He had never expected it was something the masters on the Rankings of Heaven, Earth, and Man were striving for, nor did he know it could evolve.

And I had the gall to declare that I've figured out the position card a few days ago... It turns out that I hadn't even figured out the ability card.

Zhao Changhe lay on his bed and stared into space. He did not know what to think, and he soon fell into a deep sleep.

He had a dream.

Below a tranquil night sky, the blind woman stood with her eyes closed lightly. She appeared both near and far. It was like she was a goddess of the night.

"I didn't think you'd reach the first heavenly layer in both internal and external arts this quickly."

"I've finally fucking found you! Let me go back!"

"Oh? Do you...really want to return?"

Chapter 35: This Heaven Has No Dao

"Whether I want to return or not is my business. Whether I can actually do it is another thing. Stop playing dumb with me!" Zhao Changhe could not be bothered arguing with her. He flew into a rage and rushed at her, wanting to grab her by the collar.

However, the space around him was incredibly strange. She was clearly standing right there beside the bed, but no matter how much he ran, there was always a bit of distance between them. Whatever he did, he could not touch her.

Finally, he realized that no matter how far he ran, he was still standing at his original location.

This mystery finally made Zhao Changhe realize he was in a dream and he calmed down somewhat. “Am I only dreaming about you, or did you use some divine power to make contact with me?”

“A man’s life is nothing but a grand dream in spring and autumn. Is there really any difference between the two?”

“You read the Spring and Autumn Annals as well?”

The blind woman: “?”

“Stop messing with me like this, bitch!” Zhao Changhe laughed coldly. “Things have already come to this and you still want to put on an air of mystery. Fuck you. Why don’t you just kill me and be done with it? I know you’re strong.”

The blind woman did not say anything and lightly shook her head. “It hasn’t been that long and you’ve already become like this... When you cursed at me back then, you only said I was crazy...”

“Isn’t all of this what you want to see?”

“What I want to see?”

“All those things that happened as if they were destined—if it wasn’t you pulling the strings, then what was it?” Zhao Changhe sneered. “Do you feel some sick pleasure seeing this so-called dao of heaven control the lives of the masses?”

The blind woman replied indifferently, “The dao of heaven? This heaven has no dao.”

This heaven has no dao... Zhao Changhe was at a loss and did not know how to interpret her words. Did she mean that these troubled times are brutal? Or is it that there is no supreme god or whatever

in this world? If it was the former, he felt that the world had not yet devolved into complete lawlessness. The emperor had not fallen and there was still some basic order; if it was the latter and there was no supreme being, then how did the Tome of Troubled Times come about?

He intentionally talked back to her. “Why do you think I believe that heaven has a dao?”

The blind woman calmly retorted with another question. “Is that so? Have you stayed in the mountain stronghold for too long and forgotten what was the first thing you saw in this world?”

Zhao Changhe’s expression warped slightly.

“For the time being, why don’t you look at what other bandits and demonic cults are like?” The blind woman waved her delicate hands.

The sky remained unchanged, but the scene around them began to change.

Zhao Changhe felt like he was floating in a void, high up above, looking down on the mortal world. As he gently floated up in the sky, all living things looked like ants to him.

At some mountain stronghold, torches were lighting the surroundings of a massive feast as a group of bandits laughed and drank. Numerous heads were impaled on wooden poles, all around the party grounds. At the center of it all, women were being brutally raped. Their cries and wails drifted slowly to the sky and disappeared like the wind.

Zhao Changhe became livid at the sight. “Save them!”

The blind woman did not answer.

Their perspective suddenly changed once more. This time, it was another mountain, and countless bandits were rushing a caravan like swarming bees. Pained screams resounded through the night and fresh blood drenched the mountain streams. After the bandits gleefully robbed even the last coin, they went back up the mountain, delighted with their loot.

Their perspective changed for a third time. It was somewhere in a hall belonging to the cult, a hall stained in a deep bloody red. A disciple with a malevolent gaze was skinning some innocent person alive as an offering to the Blood God as part of a sacrificial rite.

Zhao Changhe watched and gradually turned silent.

The blind woman asked, “Where is the dao of heaven?”

Zhao Changhe said coldly, “What are you trying to say? Are you saying that because I’ve become a stronghold master and have joined a demonic cult that I should be like these other bandits?”

“Whatever you do is your own business,” the blind woman replied indifferently. “I’m just answering that laughable question you had about who was controlling this world. I believe you already know who is controlling all these events; whatever becomes of the Beimang Mountain Stronghold and what you decide to do—are these not within your control? Has anyone ever controlled how you act?”

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and immediately said, “I have absolutely no idea what will become of the Beimang Mountain Stronghold. This world has nothing to do with me! What do I have to do for you to send me back? State your demands.”

“I already said I’m not the dao of heaven. I don’t have the power to let people come and go as they wish.”

“?” Zhao Changhe said, “Then how am I supposed to go back? What a blatant lie... Eh...”

“I sent you here using the laws of the heavenly dao. It’s like... fulfilling a great ambition. That’s why, if you wish to return, then you must indeed complete your objective of killing that witch.” The blind woman tilted her head slightly after getting to this point. “Of course, there’s an even more dependable method. Once you grasp the laws of space and time, you can come and go as you wish.”

Zhao Changhe roared, “How fucking long will that take!? By the time I return, my name will have been wiped from the household register!”

“If you really reach that point, you’ll naturally be able to send yourself back to the time before you were transmigrated here. Your friends and family won’t even know you left,” the woman said slowly. “Of course, this must sound a little ridiculous to you. You might not necessarily be able to grasp the changes of space and time with your intellect.”

Zhao Changhe: "...?"

You started fucking making fun of me in the real world by calling me a single dog. You haven't had enough of it even now, have you?! I'm not a single dog anymore! And about that other thing...you just wait!

The blind woman only sighed. "From the looks of it, killing that witch is probably the simpler choice."

Zhao Changhe asked coldly, "How much simpler?"

"That will depend on how fast you can cultivate. Like today, for example. You've already reached the first heavenly layer both internally and externally, right?"

"Pretty much. I feel like a freaking god after breaking through. As for whether it was you who made contact with me, or I was the one who contacted you...whether this is all a dream or reality, who knows?"

As he said this, the blind woman's figure slowly faded away. She was about to completely vanish.

Zhao Changhe still had a lot he wanted to say. How could he just let this strange young lady who said a few lines that hardly dispelled this mystery to just run away? He panicked and reached over without realizing it. "Wait!"

He did not know if the blind woman was being careless, or if it was because unintentional actions had more of an effect here, but he actually managed to grab her with his hand this time.

The blind woman was shocked but disappeared in an instant, leaving a lingering fragrance in the night sky.

Zhao Changhe looked down at his hands. He felt like he had touched a cool, white jade, tender and smooth. It was as if she did not even have bones.

Was that a dream?

He suddenly opened his eyes.

He was still inside his hut at the mountain stronghold lying on his bed. Everything just now, from the conversation to grabbing her, really just felt like a dream.

He flipped himself over, got up and looked out the window. The sky was already as white as a fish's belly.

He looked down once more at his palms. They were now covered in tiny beads of sweat.

It was not completely accurate to say that this experience, whether it was a dream or not, did not help Zhao Changhe solve this mystery.

At the very least, he could be sure of a few things.

The higher my cultivation, the more likely it will be for me to be able to feel the presence of the blind woman, or for her to feel my presence. Maybe...she can actually feel my presence and enter my dream to speak with me. Or maybe it wasn't due to my trivial breakthrough to the first layer, but because I entered the Tome of Troubled Times?

Previously, he had no way of knowing what her objective was. Now, though, he could make a guess... Maybe she's cast a wide net and is raising venomous gu[1]?

Zhao Changhe suddenly thought that there was a chance that there were other people who invited her to enter their dreams with them, and those people could be in this world. Well, it was even more likely that they were already six feet under.

This heaven had no dao. This was not a civilized world where everyone could survive. This was what the blind woman alluded to.

"Stronghold master! Stronghold master! Things aren't good!" A disciple rushed over anxiously from outside. "A few tough guys bumped into our brothers blocking two youths at a blockade we set up."

Zhao Changhe wiped away his sweat and realized his voice was tired. "What? Have they met with a righteous hero..."

“No, it looked like they’re just some random people. They said there was nothing impressive about being the 250th Hidden Dragon and went to challenge the people of the stronghold.”

Zhao Changhe sneered.

He was not laughing at the ruffians, but at the spy.

With the Ranking of Hidden Dragons shining in the sky, it appeared like everyone would come and give trouble to Zhao Changhe. With that said, however, how would they know where to find him?

Even though Yue Hongling knew he was with the Blood God Cult, she had never thought he would be in Beimang, so she could only run to challenge the cult leader and wander everywhere for a month to search for him. Other people did not even have a single clue, yet someone had already arrived at his doorstep just one day later. How did they find him? There had to be a spy.

This spy isn’t necessarily Fang Buping... It could be anyone.

“Bandits of a demonic cult are really low-level.” Zhao Changhe picked up his steel saber and strode out the door. “It just so happens that I’m in a very bad mood today. These guys came at a good time. Let me see how many heroes have come to this trifling road at Beimang.”