

T. Times 351

Chapter 351: On a Chase

Wang Daozhong had come to Kunlun to hunt down Zhao Changhe.

Just like Frost Hawk[2], ever since Wang Daozhong was assigned the task of chasing after Zhao Changhe, he had been inexplicably beaten up by Vermillion Bird, preventing him from catching up to Zhao Changhe. Since then, he was always a step behind.

When he learned that Zhao Changhe had gone to the capital, he went there only to find out that Zhao Changhe had already left. When he heard that Zhao Changhe was at Yanmen, he went there only to find out that Zhao Changhe had already gone beyond the border. And once Zhao Changhe left the pass, it became impossible to find him.

As he chased after Zhao Changhe, he watched as Zhao Changhe made a name for himself with impressive achievements announced by the Tome of Troubled Times. Whenever he saw the announcements of Zhao Changhe's achievements, he felt like each word was a slap right to his face.

Of course, he was thinking too highly of himself. Zhao Changhe had never even considered the impact his actions had on Wang Daozhong's reputation.

After the events by the border, Zhao Changhe inexplicably went to Beimang, where both he and the bandits at the mountain stronghold mysteriously disappeared. By the time Wang Daozhong received news of Zhao Changhe's whereabouts again, it was through the Tome of Troubled Times, which mentioned Xia Chichi shining brightly on Kunlun and ascending the Ranking of Man, with Zhao Changhe said to have played a supporting role.

Thankfully the Tome of Troubled Times still exists! It's truly an incredible guiding light.

Wang Daozhong did not even have the time to curse the Four Idols Cult for associating with Zhao Changhe while supposedly being allied with the Wang Clan. Just the journey from Beimang to Kunlun took him a massive amount of time.

When he headed for Kunlun, Wang Daozhong was left with no choice but to travel alone. It would have been much too troublesome to bring a large force over such a long distance. After moving with haste, he finally arrived, only to feel like the entire city was playing a prank on him.

Let alone finding Zhao Changhe, he could not even seem to get a break. The most awkward thing was that Wang Daozhong did not even know if he should identify himself as Wang Daozhong.

If he didn't, then he could not enter Yuxu Peak.

But the moment he did, Yan Que chased after him like a mad dog.

Since Yan Que was chasing after him anyway, he felt it more practical to just claim his identity to enter Yuxu Peak and explain everything to Yuxu once they met. With Daoist Yuxu's cooperation, everything else would fall into place, and killing Zhao Changhe would become much easier.

But when he tried to do so, he was unable to prove his identity, and he could not even get an audience with Daoist Yuxu.

At this point, he was without a horse, so if he left, he would have to go back on foot.

He did not have money for food either. As a dignified member of the Wang Clan of Langya, he would have to rob for food and lodging, and he had completely lost track of Zhao Changhe's whereabouts once more.

Wang Daozhong wandered outside Kunlun City with a headache. In the distance, a cloud of dust rose, indicating a caravan returning from elsewhere.

Wang Daozhong's eyes glinted fiercely as he thought of robbing this caravan for some money, food, and a ride.

He darted toward the caravan, but before he acted on his intentions, the rider at the front shouted from afar, "Are you Mister Wang of Langya?"

Wang Daozhong's murderous intent dissipated significantly. He felt almost as if he had met an old friend in a foreign land. "Who are you? How come you recognize me?"

"I am the Earth Deer of Liu from the Four Idols Cult. I once worked in the Central Plains and had the honor of meeting you by the bank of the Luo River[1] a few years ago."

“The Four Idols Cult...” Wang Daozhong said with a stern face, “My clan and your cult are allies, so why is your cult mixing with Zhao Changhe?”

The Earth Deer of Liu was taken aback. “Our saintess and Zhao Changhe have an old friendship. The whole world knows this. Although the venerable has separated them, it’s quite normal for them to join forces against a strong enemy. If even the venerable isn’t objecting to it, then why should you... Oh, I seem to have misspoken. My apologies. Anyway, our alliance does not mean that we do everything together. Killing Zhao Changhe is your Wang Clan’s private matter, what does it have to do with us?”

The reasoning was sound, and Wang Daozhong, indeed, could not really refute the other party. Not wanting to fall out with the Four Idols Cult, he reluctantly said, “Well, there should at least be no problem with you vouching for my identity at Yuxu Palace, right?”

The Earth Deer of Liu was even more surprised. “Are you not able to verify your own identity?”

Wang Daozhong opened his mouth but then closed it again. He could not just say that he had been pickpocketed, could he? He still had to save face when he could.

The Earth Deer of Liu said, “In Daoist Yuxu’s eyes, I’m just a minor figure, so I doubt I’d be able to help you with that. Mister Wang, it would be better if you simply use your own identification token...”

“Forget it,” Wang Daozhong interrupted. “I’ll just go and see Daoist Yuxu myself. Do you have any news on Zhao Changhe? Surely you’re not covering for him for the sake of your saintess?”

“I do have news about Zhao Changhe,” the Earth Deer of Liu replied. “As he came to Kunlun, he naturally intends to continue west to the Western Regions... But Mister Wang, let me tell you this in advance, Zhao Changhe travels alone and unpredictably. He could be to the west not but then suddenly head north. If you go west and are unable to find him, don’t blame me for giving you the wrong directions. My personal advice is that you should return to Langya. It is not fitting for someone of your status to be personally chasing an enemy for years without success.”

He isn’t wrong... Wang Daozhong hesitated for a moment, then cupped his hand and said, “Thank you for the information... I’ll take my leave.”

“Safe travels, sir.”

As Wang Daozhong left, the Earth Deer of Liu secretly spat.

What a joke, Zhao Changhe and our saintess are so close that it makes me vomit. The fact that the venerable has not ordered his death despite that and even sent a direct subordinate like the Fire Serpent of Yi to accompany him just goes to show how highly she thinks of him. At this rate, Zhao Changhe might even become the son-in-law of our Four Idols Cult, holding the saintess in one arm and the Fire Serpent of Yi in the other. And you think you can kill him?

Go eat dust in the Western Regions or return to Langya and end this chase. At least you're not completely stupid, it wouldn't do your Wang Clan well to break ties with our cult so quickly.

“Alright, time to head back to the fabrics store.”

Wang Daozhong had not gotten far when he saw a lone swordsman in white walking in the distance.

“Mister Wang?” the swordsman asked, seemingly confused.

“Frost Hawk from Snow-Listening Pavilion, right?”

“...Yes, and we are working on your order.”

The two looked at each other for a long time before Wang Daozhong finally said, “Don't bother going to Kunlun City. I just received reliable information indicating that Zhao Changhe is headed to the Western Regions... However, it's uncertain if he really will be heading there or staying there for long. That man is simply like a rat.”

Frost Hawk cupped his hand and said, “Thank you for the information. I shall head to the Western Regions and check then.”

After saying that, Frost Hawk left immediately.

Dedicated, indeed.

Wang Daozhong watched Frost Hawk's departing figure and thought to himself that he really should not be running around the world personally like a minor character. That was not his role. He decided to return to Langya, monitor the intelligence network, and issue commands from there.

As for Kunlun, I'd have to be fucking insane to ever come back here!

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While Wang Daozhong was getting chased around at Kunlun, Zhao Changhe was eating meat.

Zhao Changhe had no idea that his detour southeast because of a sandstorm had helped him avoid running into Wang Daozhong.

This could only be said to be great fortune.

As his enemies struggled to hunt him down, Zhao Changhe traveled several hundred li south along the mountains, reaching a small, nameless town by dusk. The town did not even have an inn, so he paid to stay in the backyard of a simple farmhouse.

One big difference between ancient and modern times may be this... If you knocked on the door of a farmhouse and asked for lodging in the modern world, it would be rare to find someone who would let you in, but here, although not everyone was willing to do so, some still would.

Not only would they agree, but if you paid enough, they would even go out to buy meat and butcher chickens for you, offering good food and wine to the honored guest.

Full of energy after a great meal, Zhao Changhe managed to drive away some of the lingering fear caused by the soul pressure he had been subjected to. His heart and mind settled and calmed down.

This departure from Kunlun marked Zhao Changhe's first real hasty escape since his appearance in this world. Previously, he would only leave after finishing his business.

Yes, for the first time after transmigrating to this world, Zhao Changhe experienced fear of death.

It wasn't like he hadn't been in a life-and-death struggle before; on the contrary, his experience fighting stronger beings was practically unrivaled. However... this was this, and that was that. The experiences were not remotely comparable. Let alone fight, he couldn't even muster the thought of it; the soul pressure he was subjected to shook his very core.

Had there been someone weaker instead, it would have been completely understandable for their Dao Heart to crumble, and they would perhaps even kneel down to become the lackey of the gods and demons, their loyal spokesperson.

Zhao Changhe pondered, wondering if, without Yuxu's cooperation, the entity backing him might have sought another agent, such as Yan Que.

His list of enemies was only growing. Fortunately, Yan Que and many others did not know who he was.

The wind ceased, the snow melted, and the moonlight shone down in serenity. Zhao Changhe stood gazing up at the moon. He recited the sutra for half an hour before finally speaking softly, "Since you're so powerful, why don't you impose your will on me?"

The blind woman's voice came from seemingly nowhere. "I do not need a dog."

Zhao Changhe fell silent.

The blind woman seemed amused. "Do you want to be one? I can let you lick my feet if you wish."

Zhao Changhe took out the golden foil and began to untie his belt.

"?" The blind woman was speechless. "What are you doing?"

"Giving it a beauty treatment."

"Childish," the blind woman said lightly. "I think you should take out the new page, not that one. Are you so afraid that you subconsciously avoid even taking it out?"

Zhao Changhe froze mid-action, then sighed after a moment. “You’re right. I am indeed afraid. I thought I was a hero, but it turns out that I’m not.”

“This is human nature. When you faced Wang Daozhong before, did you not also break into a cold sweat? The pressure from Wang Daozhong was not as extreme, but the nature of the fear is the same.”

“Indeed.”

“This isn’t a bad thing,” the blind woman said softly. “Only when you face the fears in your heart can you overcome them, and...”

She paused, a hint of laughter in her voice, “If you want to withstand the terror and death that come with the Vicious Blood Art, you must experience it yourself first. Otherwise, what could you ever endure?”

Zhao Changhe felt a stir in his heart.

“Have you ever considered that what you truly lack on your path to becoming a master is real hardships and losses?”

Zhao Changhe laughed out loud. “Maybe. For some reason, your words have made me less afraid. In fact, if I were to meet Wang Daozhong now, I probably wouldn’t be scared of him. Indeed... in a few years, what I fear today might no longer trouble me.”

The blind woman remained silent.

This was Zhao Changhe’s innate courage. He might fear certain things, but only for a while.

He was truly suited for the jianghu.

Zhao Changhe finally took out the golden page he had just obtained.

The page was not like the golden foil. It resembled a soft scroll, and even though he clearly had it in his hand, it was as if his fingers were grasping air.

The Dao has no form; the Tome is merely a manifestation. If the golden foil continues to be unsealed, it would likely take on this kind of form, not actual gold. It's simply that gold symbolizes durability and immortality; it's just an ancient and enduring concept.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and placed the golden page alongside the golden foil.

A soft golden light enveloped both, suggesting a fusion.

Chapter 352: This Page of the Heavenly Tome Is Not Yours

Zhao Changhe watched the fusion process intently and asked absentmindedly, "Will its aura attract attention?"

"I'm containing it, so you don't have to worry about that."

"So if I take it out in the future, will you contain its aura again?"

The blind woman did not respond immediately, seeming hesitant.

Zhao Changhe had a rough idea then. It seemed like the blind woman was not always by his side. It was more than likely that she was like some kind of multi-core CPU, observing many things at once, with only a portion of her attention placed on him.

It would be quite troublesome if she said that she'd block the aura for him every time. Obviously, that would require her to follow him closely at all times.

After a long pause, the blind woman said, "Can't you just avoid taking it out? It still works the same even if you keep it in the ring. What difference does it make whether it's in the ring or outside?"

"It still takes a toll on my spirit when I delve into the ring so I'd rather avoid doing it unless necessary."

"It will get much easier for you once you break through to the first layer of the Profound Mysteries."

“So, this ring can contain the Heavenly Tome’s aura?”

“Of course,” the blind woman said. “That ring has quite the background. Don’t you know who it belongs to?”

“It doesn’t seem like it would belong to that Black Tortoise, so it should have belonged to the Night Emperor, right?”

“Yes.” The blind woman hesitated for a few moments before explaining, “And it isn’t just any ring of the Night Emperor’s; it was his personal ring before he achieved the Dao. It carries great symbolic significance.”

Zhao Changhe seized the opportunity to ask, “Beside the unfinished sword and the Atlas of Mountains and Rivers, there’s also a black token in the ring. Do you know what it is?”

The blind man did not beat around the bush and answered directly, “That token is an official token given to the Black Tortoise of the past by the Night Emperor to facilitate his duties. Paired with the ring, it essentially signifies the Night Emperor’s personal authorization. Otherwise, the other members of the four idols would have been unlikely to cooperate easily, making the Black Tortoise’s tasks more difficult. Well, not that it matters right now. Almost nobody will recognize it anyway, so there’s no purpose to it. The material is quite great, though. In fact, it’s the perfect material to finish the sword.”

Zhao Changhe was not too concerned about the token’s purpose. He had plenty of strange tokens, like the blood token he bought from Ying Five and the black jade token given by Ye Wuzong after the bet. At least this one could be melted down for forging a sword. “The ancient Black Tortoise listed down the method for forging the sword and the missing materials. I have not really gotten a good look at it. If the token is one of the required materials, what else is missing?”

The blind woman replied, “You’re missing a layer of Night Flowing Sand, but that’s not important. More importantly, you’re lacking the will. That’s the most crucial part of the forging. It’s still too early for you to do it.”

She really just seems to know everything...

Zhao Changhe could not help but ask, “Can you not appear in front of me to talk? Do we always have to talk in a dream?”

The blind woman said, "I've only been talking to you because of the Heavenly Tome. Once this is settled, I'll be gone. Why do you care if I appear before you or not?"

She chuckled. "Want to see me? Then work hard to dream of me."

Zhao Changhe rolled his eyes. "You're quite the enchantress, aren't you?"

The blind woman's heart skipped a beat, but she remained silent.

Zhao Changhe only said it offhandedly, not thinking much of it, because at this moment, the fusion of the Heavenly Tome was completed.

It emitted a golden glow, brilliant yet not blinding. The golden light actually felt quite gentle, enveloping him in a warm, comfortable glow.

The Heavenly Tome does not provide energy for cultivation, but its own energy is somehow self-contained. Does the existence of the pages represent the energy reaction of the entire world?

Uncertain, Zhao Changhe thought that Ying Five's idea of collecting secret realms seemed quite logical. The more complete the world, the more elevated the entire world's status should be, bringing it closer to the level where the power of gods and demons could emerge once more.

Everyone was working toward different goals, but the ultimate goal was quite similar.

As the golden light gradually subsided, the two pages of the Heavenly Tome merged into a "bound volume." Although a bound volume of only two pages seemed pitiful, like a product brochure, it could at least be called a book instead of loose pages.

The material of the golden foil had changed as well, becoming like the yellow silk of imperial edicts, though tougher, as if woven from tens of thousands of strands. The new page, originally intangible, had also transformed and taken on this yellow silk form. The two pages were now connected and could be opened and closed together.

When opened, the pages were still blank, but faint patterns had emerged.

The patterns depicted natural landscapes, similar to those that Zhao Changhe had seen in the secret realm before, these patterns containing profound meanings. Delving into it mentally, Zhao Changhe felt as though he was in a world of lush green mountains and clear waters, with nothing else around him.

But this time, the landscape in his eyes seemed to go beyond just virtual reality. It was as if it had evolved beyond even mixed reality, becoming a completely new world.

Zhao Changhe asked, “Am I still here?”

The blind woman almost laughed but understood what he meant and replied, “Yes, you’re still here. That’s just your consciousness connecting with the Heavenly Tome, forming a spiritual world. Your body has not actually entered the book’s realm.”

“Can someone merely at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate really achieve this?”

“You’re already very close to the first layer of the Profound Mysteries. In fact, the spiritual energy of some masters who have already unlocked the Profound Mysteries might not even surpass yours. What you lack is integration, not absolute attributes.”

“So now I’m connected to this spiritual world, but what’s next? There’s nothing here. Where’s the old grandpa who’s supposed to grant me wisdom?”

The blind woman coldly retorted, “Should I crack open your skull and pour in that stuff you love to smear so much? Would that count as granting you wisdom?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

As they spoke, a celestial figure gracefully floated through the landscape before Zhao Changhe. She moved with ethereal grace, like a snowflake fluttering by in the winter. Her eyes were closed and she resembled a goddess descending from the clouds.

Zhao Changhe was mesmerized.

Didn't you tell me to try dreaming of you? Then why bother appearing before me? Wait, no, since when did the blind woman become so beautiful...

He'd always thought that she was beautiful; even in modern times, many would sneak a glance at her. However, she still fit within the normal concept of "beauty." She usually maintained a modern look, clad in black martial attire, with short hair, looking more like a shadowy female assassin than a fortune teller.

But this time, she wore a celestial maiden's garb, the ribbon around her waist fluttering behind her. In fact, she looked a lot like Tang Wanzhuang. Her long hair flowed, and she exuded an otherworldly demeanor. Even with her eyes closed, she looked like a goddess.

So, this is what the Heavenly Tome unlocks? It lets you change outfits?

Zhao Changhe almost wanted to spit out a mouthful of blood. Is this what I've risked my life for? To see the golden foil turn into a brochure and then watch you change outfits?

You might as well strip it off... No, wait, that's wrong too!

"Don't be so agitated." The blind woman floated in front of him and sighed. "This page of the Heavenly Tome is about the Dao of nature. The scene in your heart aligns with this meaning. I have not changed outfits; it's just how your mind presents it under the influence of the environment."

Zhao Changhe's eyes widened. "How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"I can see how you look at me," the blind woman sighed again. "Honestly, you should seriously comprehend this page of the Heavenly Tome. It might not directly benefit your cultivation, as it doesn't exactly align with your path, but it can serve as a reference and help you refine your state of mind."

Zhao Changhe caught the implication, "You mean it has other benefits?"

"When you see me like this, who do you think of?"

"...Tang Wanzhuang."

The blind woman chuckled.

Zhao Changhe kept a stern face, not saying a word.

“So who else would this page of the Heavenly Tome correspond to if not her?” the blind woman said calmly. “If you want to treat Tang Wanzhuang’s problem, nothing in the world would be more suitable than this page of the Heavenly Tome. Not even your Rejuvenation Art can compare...”

Zhao Changhe was startled. “Explain, why wouldn’t the Rejuvenation Art work? I feel as though it’s quite powerful. With more practice, it should be able to heal a simple lung meridian, right?”

“She hasn’t just injured her lung meridian; that’s a misconception based on surface observations... Her injury is more mystical, not something physical treatment can address. If it were just a lung meridian, do you think Xia Longyuan would not have been able to heal it? Or would he be so cold-hearted as to not treat it? That makes no sense. Even if only to ensure a loyal subordinate could function like a normal human, he would have healed her. He’s not an idiot; the reason he didn’t do it is simply that he has no way.”

Zhao Changhe asked, “Then how can the Heavenly Tome help?”

“She has made you slow down and connect with the essence of nature. You should return the favor by immersing her in nature. As for how to do so, you have the Heavenly Tome in your hands. Figure it out yourself.”

“...”

The blind woman’s figure slowly faded. “You managed to figure out the golden foil on your own. You should be able to do the same for this new page you’ve just acquired. I won’t be appearing again for a while. Take care.”

Zhao Changhe felt that the blind woman acting like the Riddler[1] this time was pure revenge for him smearing the golden foil.

Chapter 353: Another Exploration of the Heavenly Tome

The blind man really did just disappear without a trace, leaving behind only one last message: “Keep the Heavenly Tome in the ring, and don’t take it out easily.”

Zhao Changhe, feeling a bit frustrated, compliantly placed the Heavenly Tome into his storage ring and began to ponder.

She used to be a lot like the Riddler, yet compared to before, not only did she actually take action this time, but she also explained a lot more things to him.

The token was a material that could contribute to the forging of the sword, but I still lack Night Flowing Sand. Although the ancient Black Tortoise listed down the missing materials, I don’t recognize them, so how was I supposed to know what is what, or what material the token is made up of? What she told me is invaluable, even though it’s not much.

And this ring once belonged to the Night Emperor... Since she said it was something the Night Emperor used before attaining the Dao, it might not represent the Night Emperor’s power, but it should at least be a symbol of his personal authority. The token definitely had a specific meaning back in the day, but that’s no longer the case.

Since the blind woman knew all this, that proves that she truly is quite knowledgeable. And this page of the Heavenly Tome representing nature, I hadn’t really thought of any special applications for it, but the blind woman was able to point out that it could benefit Tang Wanzhuang.

Just this piece of information made Zhao Changhe’s resistance to her lessen significantly.

And also... she said that she didn’t want a dog.

Zhao Changhe was lost in thought. Compared to coercion, isn’t the blind woman’s approach a lot better? Everything really is relative.

Fine, considering this, I’ll use less of my beauty cream on you in the future.

However, the Riddler remained the Riddler. He still had to explore the specific features of the Heavenly Tome himself. Even more annoying was that he couldn’t even hold it in his hands to slowly explore it like earlier. He had to keep it in the ring and use his spiritual energy to perceive it, and that was incredibly tiring for him at the moment. He was unable to sustain that for long periods of time.

Suddenly, Zhao Changhe realized that she might have a way to contain the aura of the Heavenly Tome, but deliberately did not do so to force him to keep it in the ring, which would make it inconvenient for him to smear his beauty cream on it!

Case solved... damn, she got me.

Zhao Changhe could not help but find it amusing. The blind woman suddenly seemed much more down-to-earth to him.

He composed himself, then immersed his mind into the Heavenly Tome's landscape of green mountains and clear waters.

Earlier, he had only roughly extended his senses over it, still hoping the blind woman would explain more to him. But since she did not provide an explanation, he had to immerse himself and figure it out himself.

While the page of the Heavenly Tome he had just acquired was said to represent nature, that did not refer to creation nor the evolution in nature. The Heavenly Tome was not a tome of creation. Essentially, all its pages were related to martial arts.

The most significant difference between the golden foil now and the golden foil before was that it could now also account for advancements in martial arts in relation to the Dao of nature—things like sonic attacks, formations, and even movement arts that utilized wind itself.

The golden foil, with the addition of the new page, was likely able to partially cover the five elements^[1] and some related concepts, such as the path of lightning. If he practiced fire or ice-attribute true qi, he might gain some insights and benefits from the tome. However, these insights only concerned the integration of nature into one's martial arts, and it would not specifically explain the five elements.

Zhao Changhe did not think that this page had much to do with the Four Idols Cult. The cult likely corresponded to another page of the Heavenly Tome, one dedicated solely to the Dao of the five elements.

Additionally, this page did not correspond to the geography and resources of mountains and rivers—that could be another page of the Heavenly Tome, or it might not exist at all. Treasures and

natural wonders, though related to martial arts, were also separate, and their connection remained unknown.

But if he considered this page as the foundation, combining it with a page on the resources of mountains and rivers, and another on the five elements, it felt like a complete form would emerge.

He now had a rough idea of what the Heavenly Tome should be.

The original golden foil could analyze various specific martial arts, acting more like a comprehensive martial arts manual, while this page was akin to an upgrade to the golden foil, adding new features.

For example, the original golden foil could record and analyze an opponent's martial arts during a battle but could not analyze their internal arts. To understand someone's internal arts, movement arts, or special sutra, he needed to analyze the manuals themselves. The limitations in this aspect were quite clear.

Similarly, if the opponent used sonic attacks or set up formations, the golden foil could not analyze them. Zhao Changhe could never rely on the golden foil to break formations. Or if someone attacked him with fire, it could not even distinguish whether it was fire produced by qi or just normal fire.

Now, with this new page, that limitation was gone.

The next time he encountered sonic attacks or environment-based formations, he would be able to analyze and break them, and even learn from them.

If he wanted to derive a sonic attack method from this natural landscape, it should be possible, though it would require a deep understanding of music and prolonged study—something only someone like Tang Wanzhuang could probably manage.

For instance... Zhao Changhe concentrated, trying to recall the brief confrontation with Tian Lingzi in the poison chamber, focusing on Tian Lingzi's peculiar footwork and movement art.

A figure of Tian Lingzi appeared in the landscape, demonstrating wind-assisted footwork.

The supreme movement art of the Thief Saint Ye Wuzong was thoroughly analyzed here.

Text even began to appear in the air: “The wind moves without a trace, inner core propelling the Heavenly Wind Body, concurrent internal and external cultivation, a leaf moves without a trace.”[2]

Below was a detailed manual. The page even analyzed Ye Wuzong’s core cultivation technique. It seemed that as long as the technique was related to nature, it was up for grabs.

Sisi already managed to steal a manual, and that was already quite unfortunate for Ye Wuzong, and now Zhao Changhe had something that provided an even more comprehensive explanation of the Thief Saint’s techniques.

Zhao Changhe let out a long sigh, withdrawing his consciousness from the Heavenly Tome. He suddenly realized that he was so exhausted that he was on the brink of collapsing.

Yet his expression was one of great joy. This trip was worth it...

Although this brief period of analysis did not yet show how the page could help with Tang Wanzhuang’s injury, he was confident that with continued study and exploration, he would eventually find a solution. For now, the fact that he could analyze other people’s cultivation techniques and movement arts meant that he would never lack martial arts knowledge and inheritances in the future.

This did not mean he had to steal and learn the Thief Saint’s cultivation technique—those techniques were not aligned with his path, and learning them was not necessary.

The same went for the movement arts. Ultimately, his movement arts were also derived from nature. With this advantage, he could base his techniques on what he learned, combining them with the Blood God Cult’s Traceless Soaring Blood and Tang Wanzhuang’s Water Treading Art to eventually create a set of movement arts more suited to him.

And this was just from two pages of the Heavenly Tome. What more could he achieve if he had more of the pages?

No wonder the gods and demons are vying for it. It encompasses all aspects of martial arts in the world. Once any of them has the Heavenly Tome in hand, it would not be difficult for them to surpass everyone in the world.

However, this still doesn't quite align with my path to the Profound Mysteries; the direction isn't right.

Zhao Changhe did not want to think too much about it for now. He returned to his room to rest. He was so mentally exhausted that he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

This time, the blind woman did not appear in his dream.

Instead, he saw a long-forgotten face, in the midst of the blazing inferno at Luo Family Village. A man approached Vermillion Bird and reported, "The entirety of the Luo family, except for Luo Zhenwu, has been executed."

Who was that again... Oh, right, Cult Leader Xue.

Chapter 354: Stormy Wushan

"Up so early, young man?"

Zhao Changhe was training as usual in the courtyard when the kind, old farmer brought him a bowl of hot soup.

The old man sighed. "It's almost the Lunar New Year, yet you're still traveling. It seems that times are indeed tough for everyone..."

Zhao Changhe was taken aback.

Having just come from Kunlun, where massive snow still came floating down from the sky, he thought that it was still deep winter, but it turned out the New Year was actually approaching. Time really does fly by...

Although he had not felt the time in Kunlun to be that long, it had actually already been a month.

He remembered that when the Tome of Troubled Times made an announcement on Xia Chichi, it was still early in the twelfth month. He was not sure which day it was exactly, but it was likely still in the first half of the month.

Since then, in the chaos and confusion, another half month had slipped by...

It was almost the New Year, but there was no festive atmosphere to experience. He had just been messing around with a bunch of fools in the Valley of the Wicked. The saddest part was that, at this rate, he would still be on the road on New Year's Day. In the year and a quarter since he had transmigrated, he had spent seven or eight months on the road. For instance, the journey from Beimang to Kunlun alone had taken nearly a month.

No wonder ancient poets wrote so many poems about the hardships of travel—it truly was a pain.

Zhao Changhe sighed in turn. “That’s just how it is. I’ve only celebrated the New Year once in this world.”

The old man looked at him sympathetically, not sure how to interpret his words.

Zhao Changhe did not elaborate. He thanked the old man for the hot soup and meal, and rode out of the small town.

It was early in the morning, and as he slowly traveled through the morning mist, he thought about how he was another year older. He was twenty when he transmigrated, and he was now about to turn twenty-two.

Even at twenty, calling himself a young man felt like a bit of a stretch. Vermillion Bird seemed to consider him an over-aged rebellious young man. Now, that seemed to really be the case. In many ways, those of this age were considered the backbone of the jianghu. The Tome of Troubled Times had even set the cutoff age for the Ranking of Hidden Dragons to be at twenty-five, which actually seemed a bit high.

Time really flies by. Wanzhuang is probably nearing thirty by now.

Uh, wait... What about Yangyang? Is she of age yet? Will she be considered to be of age by the New Year or her birthday? When is her birthday, anyway?

If he counted from the day that he made the three-year agreement, not even a year had passed. The agreement had been made in the third lunar month. Thinking about it now, he realized that he was

indeed quite remarkable. Most of all, his luck seemed almost unbelievable, almost as if he was some kind of chosen one.

The progression through the seventh to the ninth layers of the Profound Gate was supposed to be arduously slow and difficult. In fact, even going from the sixth to the seventh layer was considered a significant hurdle.

He initially thought that it would take him a long time to advance, but then Xia Longyuan gave him a fruit, allowing him to break through immediately.

He then thought that it would take a long time to go from the seventh to eighth layer, but then he and Yue Hongling dual cultivated in the Black Tortoise Secret Realm, allowing him to break through once again.

The hurdle from the eighth to the ninth layer was supposed to be tougher still. Based on the experiences of Yue Hongling, Cui Yuanyong, and Chi Li, they had all been stuck at this stage for over a year and a half. He thought that even if he were a genius, it would take him months. But then a single Dragon Elephant Blood Ginseng pushed him past that hurdle instantly, all the way to the threshold of the Profound Mysteries.

He had been seeking the path to the Profound Mysteries since reaching the eighth layer of the Profound Gate, witnessing Yue Hongling's breakthrough process and receiving her guidance in exploring spiritual power. In his perception, he has been exploring the path to the Profound Mysteries for several months, facing numerous obstacles and near misses, which made it appear to be the biggest hurdle he has ever faced.

But in the eyes of others, they would probably curse him for complaining. After all, had he not just broken through to the ninth layer recently?

Even Yuxu could not help but ask him why he was in such a hurry and if there was something pressing him from behind.

Yes, there is...

Having witnessed the power of gods and demons firsthand, he knew that no matter how gallant and heroic he might seem to those of the jianghu

, he was nothing more than an ant in the eyes of others.

When will I reach that level?

*

Traveling south from Kunlun for several days, he indeed spent the New Year on the road, hearing not even a hint of firecrackers.

Along the way, he saw numerous towering mountains to the south.

Zhao Changhe knew that beyond these mountains lay the fertile lands of the Shu Territory[1].

Bashan[2] Sword Hut was not far from where he was. Yue Hongling had mentioned wanting to visit the Sword Hut to learn their sword arts before heading further southwest to explore the mysteries of the Miaojiang's Gu.

Zhao Changhe had once suggested to Yue Hongling that perhaps fate would bring them together again in this vast world—that was because Bashan and Wushan were very close, as they were part of the same mountain range. In many poems, the two were even used interchangeably.[3]

He had long planned to visit Wushan to find Cult Leader Xue, which could lead to an “accidental” meeting with Yue Hongling in Bashan, perhaps allowing them to try out that position he had been asking for.

However, after spending so much time in Kunlun, it was clear that by the time he reached Bashan, Yue Hongling would likely have already left.

Bashan Sword Hut was where Han Wubing came from, though he had fallen out with them. Zhao Changhe was interested in visiting it, but now was not the right time. It was better for him to focus on the matters with the Blood God Cult first.

In Chinese culture, Wushan is often associated with clouds and rain, evoking romantic encounters. But in this world, it did not have such a reputation. Although there were ancient records and stories about the Goddess of Wushan[4], she was not considered an ancient god or demon, so no one cared much.

People were more concerned with the concept of “Wu” as in witchcraft.[5]

For example, the Blood God Cult, which practiced techniques involving blood and qi, conducted various sacrificial rituals involving blood and flesh, and even performed brutal rites like skinning people. This was likely because they had obtained an ancient demon’s formation disk. They were cruel, bloodthirsty, and evil, causing them to be out of place in civilized society, making them out to be a more typical demonic cult compared to the Four Idols Cult.

When Zhao Changhe first joined the Blood God Cult, he was just an outsider bandit, and he had made it quite far since back then. If he were to join the cult now, he would find it unbearable.

For a long time, the world saw Zhao Changhe, who was rumored to be from the Blood God Cult, as a fearsome and vicious demon. His nickname, Bloodthirsty Asura, originated from this reputation. At that time, people could not believe that Zhao Changhe could be a chivalrous hero—it simply did not fit with his background.

It was no wonder that the cult was so fond of this place named “Wu,” as they had transformed what was once a gentle and beautiful place into a den of demons.

Fortunately, their cultivation was mediocre, making it difficult for them to wreak havoc in the jianghu.

Even their cult leader, who was the strongest among them, was only at the ninth layer of the Profound Gate, having been stuck at the threshold of the Profound Mysteries his entire life. Still well in his prime at over forty years old, with decades of experience and well-honed techniques, he was defeated by a mere twenty-year-old girl at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate, resulting in him being reduced to a laughingstock.

With that being the case for the leader, there was naturally nothing special when it came to the abilities of the other high-level experts of the cult.

For instance, those who practiced the Vicious Blood Art either ended up being tortured by the vicious blood qi to the point of near-death, causing them to give up or have to rely on Blood Settling Pills to suppress the qi, which would then dull the effects of the cultivation technique, rendering their efforts futile. Once the Vicious Blood Art lost the boost from vicious blood qi, the body tempered through the cultivation technique was not even as good as any other random body tempering technique.

Then there were those who claimed to have advanced to the Blood God Art, which Zhao Changhe once dreamed of obtaining and practicing.

In reality, this cultivation technique turned out no better than relying on Blood Settling Pills. While it avoided a dependency on pills, it similarly suppressed vicious blood qi, preventing the full potential of the path from being realized.

Xue Canghai's defeat could largely be attributed to this. Otherwise, in terms of technique and understanding of martial arts, Yue Hongling would not have stood a chance. It was because his cultivation technique was flawed that Yue Hongling found a way to defeat him.

Such a cult, no matter how evil, could not stir much trouble. Whenever they tried, they would be hunted down and suppressed by Tang Wanzhuang's Demon Suppression Bureau and various righteous martial artists seeking fame. Moreover, they were even attacked by the Four Idols Cult—or more precisely, Vermillion Bird single-handedly stormed into their headquarters, silencing the entire cult and forcing them into submission, completely shattering their morale.

As for the reason Vermillion Bird even bothered to do that? As Black Tortoise was busy and no longer really working for the cult, they were short on manpower and needed some people for grunt work.

In other words, the Blood God Cult's notorious deeds were mostly done during its earlier years. In recent years, the declining Blood God Cult had not committed many atrocities—not for lack of trying, but for lack of capability. Attacking the Luo Family Village was their most impressive operation in years.

At the moment, the Blood God Cult was facing another headache—the Maitreya Cult, having failed in their eastward expansion at Gusu, had begun advancing westward to Jingxiang[6]. The Maitreya Cult sent an envoy to Wushan, seeking the Blood God Cult's cooperation in rebellion.

Xue Canghai was torn. He certainly wanted to rebel, believing that the atmosphere of widespread slaughter could help him unlock the Profound Mysteries and gain independence from the Four Idols Cult.

However, he knew that the Maitreya Cult was not a reliable ally. Despite their initial momentum, over the past six months, they had been resisted by southern aristocratic families led by the Tang Clan, facing constant attacks and struggling to gain a foothold. There was no sign of them being able to sweep through the south.

Should he take the gamble?

As Xue Canghai was negotiating with the envoy of the Maitreya Cult, Zhao Changhe, after half a month's journey, arrived at Wushan on Snow-Treading Crow, trotting through the spring rain.

Chapter 355: Returning in Glory

As Zhao Changhe climbed the steps, he looked around with great interest at the scenery of Wushan.

The transition from winter to spring, coupled with the change in geography, made it feel like the majestic and towering mountains of Kunlun had given way to verdant landscapes. The ice and snow were gone, replaced by lush greenery and the fresh scent of spring rain. The chirping of birds and the blooming of flowers made it feel like he had entered another secret realm.

It was a fascinating experience.

Unfortunately, his literary knowledge was inconsistent. Occasionally, he could come up with some brilliant lines, but when faced with such poetic scenery, he could only recall a few famous lines, but those did not quite fit the mood.

No body of water can compare to the vast sea, and no clouds can compare with the clouds of Wushan[1] But Cult Leader Xue resides here, so would that really be appropriate?

Or perhaps, Wushan is high, Wushan is low, in the evening rain, the lover does not return, and the room left empty[2].

Cult Leader Xue would probably hit him if he heard that, wondering who was being left alone in an empty room.

Come to think of it, the entire Blood God Cult seems disinterested in women. They seem like they're only obsessed with blood and killing... What a bizarre cult.

In reality, not many people knew that the Blood God Cult was based in Wushan. Otherwise, they might have been wiped out long ago. Zhao Changhe had learned their location from Wan Dongliu of the Four Idols Cult. On the surface, there was only a mountain stronghold on Wushan, where bandits gathered to act as rulers of the mountain, robbing and plundering. The cult operated in

secrecy, hidden in an underground secret realm within the mountain, much like the setup in Beimang.

With Maitreya causing chaos in the south, the officials of the Great Xia did not have the time to deal with mountain bandits.

But compared to Beimang, this mountain stronghold was quite a bit better. It was, after all, not just set up in a single location. The mountain stronghold stretched from the mountainside to the peak, with numerous large and small fortresses scattered about and even some other defensive structures.

“Stop, what are you doing here?”

As he reached the entrance of a fortress, a group of bandits, unable to tolerate his approach any longer, surrounded him and glared at him nervously. “This isn’t a place for sightseeing... We’ve been putting up with you for a while...”

Zhao Changhe almost burst out laughing. “Why have you been putting up with me?”

One of them hesitated, then said softly, “Aren’t you... Zhao Changhe?”

At this moment, Zhao Changhe’s Dragon Bird was stored in his ring, causing him to be missing a signature identifier, but his distinctive scarred face was left uncovered. He was openly presenting himself as Zhao Changhe, not passing himself off as Wang Daozhong.

Zhao Changhe smiled, “Why do you seem to be unsure? Is it just because I’m not carrying my saber?”

“Nowadays, everyone imitating Zhao Changhe carries a broad saber. How could the real Zhao Changhe not have one? I told you all it wasn’t him!” one of them complained to his companions. “Letting someone who might not even be Zhao Changhe get this close to the gate without stopping him—what a joke!”

Zhao Changhe laughed, “So if the real Zhao Changhe came, you wouldn’t stop him?”

The bandits all replied, “Of course! Boss Zhao is one of our own. If he comes, we would welcome him home.”

What nonsense... Zhao Changhe felt both amused and exasperated. "Weren't you guys supposed to be hunting me down? How did I suddenly turn into someone you would welcome home?"

"The kill order was forgotten long ago. Who would still take that seriously?"

One of the bandits cautiously asked, "Are you really him? Stop pretending if you're not. We've already called out some of the brothers from Beimang to come and verify if you really are Boss Zhao!"

As they spoke, a man hurriedly came from inside. "I heard you spotted someone that looks like our boss? Shit, it really is you, boss! You're finally here! We missed you!"

Zhao Changhe took a look at who it was and could not help but laugh. It was one of his men from Beimang, for whom he had asked Black Tortoise to send a recommendation letter. As he expected, Xue Canghai had reluctantly given them minor leadership positions, and this man, Liuzi, had been made the leader at the mountain stronghold at the base of the mountain.

Liuzi pushed through the crowd and quickly embraced Zhao Changhe, then turned to the others and puffed out his chest. "Who said he's not our boss? If this isn't our boss, then is he your father?"

Everyone was stunned.

You aren't even the big boss here, so why are you acting like you are?

But no one dared to protest. Instead, admiration appeared on everyone's faces, and they all bowed respectfully. "So it really is Boss Zhao..."

"Greetings, Brother Zhao!"

"Hello, Boss Zhao!"

"Boss Zhao, you're our idol!"

“Welcome, Boss Zhao. Come inside and rest. Should we inform the cult leader of your arrival? Would you like us to show you around?”

Seeing the genuine excitement on their faces, Zhao Changhe was amused. Maybe I should start a fan club?

He had expected that he would not be treated as a traitor if he did openly come to the Blood God Cult, especially given his current strength and connections. Forget about the underlings, even Cult Leader Xue would have to handle him with care. Not long ago, he and the saintess of the Four Idols Cult had even killed Tarantula and Tian Lingzi, as had been reported by the Tome of Troubled Times. With that being the case, even if Cult Leader Xue wanted to kill him, he would have to first consider whether he could.

But he had not expected the cult members to treat him like one of their own, and regard him with such pride... It was truly as if they did not consider him to be a defector from the Blood God Cult but as someone returning in glory.

Had he known this, he might not have needed to waste a favor with Lady Three to infiltrate the cult.

“Move aside! I will naturally be the one to show the boss around. You think it’s your turn to do it?” Liuzi scolded the others with his hands on his hips, and then he turned to Zhao Changhe with a smile. “Boss, Wushan is beautiful and it has many scenic spots. Would you like me to show you around?”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “You seem to have settled in well.”

“Yup. The rules are pretty much the same in all the green forests. Instructor Sun has a decent position here and takes care of everyone.” Liuzi happily led the way. “The climate here is fantastic. The brothers can’t believe we were stuck in the icy cold of Beimang.”

Zhao Changhe waved off the other eager followers and followed Liuzi into the fortress. “Instructor Sun didn’t face any trouble?”

“I heard he had a tough time for a while. Some people in the cult were trying to push him away. But then the cult leader said that as long as his responsibilities did not lie in the spreading of the cult’s doctrine, he was only responsible for training people.”

“I see. I was worried that the Blood God Cult would unjustly punish Old Sun. That would have changed our relationship considerably...”

Liuzi laughed. “No way. They didn’t do anything to him, and even though he was pushed to the side for a while, that was really just for a while. Many people’s attitudes changed, and some even secretly looked for him to ask him one thing or another. I heard even an elder protector went to him for guidance, and that protector’s cultivation is much higher than Instructor Sun’s... Instructor Sun is now seen as a reclusive expert, like an old man selling wontons.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled, “Everyone’s story involves selling wontons. Why not sweeping monks?”

Liuzi: “Huh?”

“Never mind, go on.”

“The cult leader also respects Instructor Sun. He even permitted him to access many of the cult’s core manuals and the sacred artifact. As a result, Instructor Sun’s cultivation has improved significantly over the past year and he’s broken through to the sixth layer of the Profound Gate. He’s no longer just a regular instructor. He’s been promoted to a protector of the cult. Now, no one dares to marginalize him.”

Zhao Changhe sighed inwardly.

Not every instructor under an elder in the Blood God Cult is as good as Old Sun... Old Sun was not only responsible but also had incredibly solid fundamentals. I used to think that this was standard, but after so long in the jianghu, I’ve come to realize that most martial artists are quite average in this regard and don’t really pay much attention to the fundamentals.

Instructor Sun had simply lacked proper opportunities and resources for advancement. If he had sufficient resources, he would not have only reached the fourth layer of the Profound Gate in his thirties.

There were actually many hidden talents in the world, but they often went unnoticed. This was true in every faction. Most people did not ever get the chance to find a master and learn proper techniques.

As they talked, they made their way up the mountain, with someone having already gone ahead to report to the main base of the cult.

Xue Canghai was discussing matters with an envoy from the Maitreya Cult when a guard outside peeked in, making faces but not speaking. Annoyed, Xue Canghai got up, walked over, and slapped the guard. “Who taught you to act like a rat?”

The guard, feeling aggrieved, held his cheek and whispered, “Zhao Changhe has come to the mountain.”

Xue Canghai’s heart skipped a beat, realizing that he had wrongly hit the guard. The guard had been well-intentioned and smart—if the envoy from the Maitreya Cult had overheard, it would have been difficult to handle what came next.

Moreover, Zhao Changhe had the habit of killing other envoys in front of their hosts. He had done it twice already, once in front of the Wang Clan and once in front of Batu’s army, with one of the victims being from the Maitreya Cult.

Thinking quickly, Xue Canghai turned to the envoy with a smile. “I have some urgent personal matters to attend to. You can head back to your accommodation and rest for now. We can continue our discussion later.”

After saying that, he signaled to the guard to ensure that the envoy did not see Zhao Changhe, then hurriedly left the meeting hall, rushing down the mountain.

Halfway down, he looked down and saw the mountain stronghold in an uproar, with a crowd of Blood God Cult followers surrounding Zhao Changhe like they were welcoming a celebrity. Zhao Changhe, smiling and waving, looked like he was reveling in the attention.

A group of recent arrivals from Beimang surrounded him, chatting and laughing as they made their way up the mountain, gathering followers from each of the fortresses they passed. The procession made it look as if Zhao Changhe was the actual cult leader.

Did he come here to show off? Xue Canghai ground his teeth in frustration.

As he pondered Zhao Changhe’s true intentions, another figure rapidly approached from the other side of the mountain. In no time, they arrived before Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe halted.

Amidst the silent, expectant crowd of bandits, Zhao Changhe dropped to one knee and offered a deep bow. "I'm very happy to see you in good health, Instructor Sun. It seems that you've made great progress in your cultivation as well."

Everyone fell silent. Even Instructor Sun, who had rushed over to see his student, was stunned by the gesture, forgetting to help Zhao Changhe up.

When I blocked you at the Ancient Sword Lake, you didn't show me such respect.

Xue Canghai, who was watching from afar, felt relieved. This display suggested that Zhao Changhe at least did not come here to cause trouble.

Just as he thought this, Zhao Changhe looked up toward the top of the mountain where Xue Canghai stood, as if he had known he was there all along. Xue Canghai's heart skipped a beat again. Such heightened senses, he's at least at the door of the Profound Mysteries!

Zhao Changhe stood up and spoke calmly, his voice echoing across the mountains. "Cult Leader Xue, I trust you have been well. I, Zhao Changhe, an outsider bandit, am here to pay my respects."

Chapter 356: Xue Canghai

Xue Canghai watched from afar as Zhao Changhe ascended the mountain with confident strides. He could not help but show a hint of admiration in his eyes.

Such courage! Such boldness! This is what a man should be like.

The men of the Blood God Cult admired Zhao Changhe because they saw in him the spirit they themselves only aspired to have. Zhao Changhe fearlessly roamed the jianghu with his saber, challenging all who stood in his way. There was no member of the Blood God Cult who would not appreciate and respect someone who dared to enter a den of demons alone and declare his arrival so boldly.

Unfortunately, they could not do the same. They simply saw him as a reflection of their dreams.

Subconsciously, they began to see him as their representative in the outside world, so they were indeed reluctant to label him a traitor.

Even Xue Canghai felt this way.

At that moment, he even forgot about the envoy of the Maitreya Cult in the mountain stronghold. With a casual wave of his hand, he transmitted his voice, “Young Hero Zhao, come meet me in the main hall. Why is everyone crowding around? It’s embarrassing. Disperse. Hengchuan, guide him to the main hall.”

Instructor Sun bowed, “Yes.”

Zhao Changhe noticed that except for the brief encounter amidst the blazing Luo Family Village, he had never properly seen Cult Leader Xue. Seeing him now, he found Xue Canghai to actually have quite a presence.

Choosing to receive him in the main hall of the mountain stronghold instead of some secret underground chamber subtly displayed his stance toward him. Zhao Changhe smiled slightly and confidently ascended the mountain.

Instructor Sun, walking beside him, whispered, “Changhe...”

“Hm?”

“What did you come here for? Also, couldn’t you have at least given me a heads-up?”

Zhao Changhe laughed. “I originally came with the intention to challenge the cult leader... but I have not decided to what extent.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me put it this way... if I defeat Cult Leader Xue and take his ranking of seventy-first on the Ranking of Man, I am screwed. It would be really embarrassing and my wife would probably ridicule me.”

Instructor Sun retorted, “You little...”

Zhao Changhe climbed the mountain with an innocent look. Indeed, this was what he truly thought.

However, it was still difficult for others to believe him at this time. Instructor Sun sighed, “Stop with the pretense. You’ve already planned how to take over the cult after killing the cult leader, haven’t you?”

“Hey, Old Sun, you can eat whatever you want, but don’t just go around saying whatever you want.”

“Come on, I know your tricks.” Instructor Sun looked around cautiously, then whispered, “When those from Beimang arrived, many advised the cult leader not to give them any proper positions, fearing a day like this would come.”

“And yet the cult leader still gave them proper positions?”

“The cult leader said that they came with a letter from Venerable Black Tortoise, and Venerable Black Tortoise ranks even higher than Venerable Vermillion Bird. If the Four Idols Cult wanted his head, they could have taken it long ago. Being overly cautious would only invite ridicule, so it was better to just concede.”

Zhao Changhe chuckled. He found that Cult Leader Xue was actually much better than his reputation suggested. The man had a certain charm and was not some buffoon or clown as he had originally anticipated.

On the other hand, the supposedly honorable Venerable Black Tortoise seemed more like a clown.

Instructor Sun side-eyed him, “So, are you really thinking of taking over?”

Zhao Changhe countered, “You’re quite loyal, aren’t you?”

Instructor Sun was silent for a moment, then sighed. “Yes. I’ve been in the Blood God Cult for twenty years. This is my home.”

Zhao Changhe scrutinized Instructor Sun for a while before laughing. “It was one of my plans, but it was just an option in case Cult Leader Xue ended up being unreasonable. If things went south and I had to fight my way through, having people on the inside would help. However, from how things seem at the moment, it seems like there won’t be any need to take such drastic measures.”

As they spoke, they reached the main hall. The guards at the entrance greeted Zhao Changhe with fervent respect. Instructor Sun closed his mouth and silently led Zhao Changhe into the main hall.

Damn, the guards showed even more respect to him than me, a protector of the cult... Well, it makes sense. Zhao Changhe’s reputation as the First Hidden Dragon places him on par with the cult leader, and I simply can’t compare to that. Still, despite how much greater he’s become, he was still willing to kneel and bow to me. Fuck, that felt good.

With a muddled mind, he headed to the main hall with Zhao Changhe. Zhao Changhe strode in, stood at the center, and then bowed to Xue Canghai, who was seated on the main seat. “Greetings, Cult Leader Xue.”

Xue Canghai nodded slightly. “Have a seat. Serve Young Hero Zhao tea.”

Zhao Changhe unceremoniously took a seat on the guest seat, and a cult member served him tea. Zhao Changhe glanced at the server and clicked his tongue.

A male cult member... Do they really not have any maids? Cult Leader Xue, you’re simply a paragon of manliness.

Xue Canghai sipped his tea, observing Zhao Changhe. After a long pause, he finally spoke up. “The cult members regard you as one of their own. Do you find it foolish? Just a year ago, they treated you as a traitor and were hunting you down. Yet now, they regard you with such respect. Is it laughable?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “When I was heading to the Ancient Sword Lake, I told Instructor Sun that apart from Fang Buping, I have no enmity with the Blood God Cult. On the contrary, I even owe the cult a debt of gratitude for sheltering me and granting me its teachings. If the cult members see me as one of them, I’m happy. The bond had not been severed, and I am grateful that the cult leader doesn’t wish to do me harm.”

Xue Canghai neither confirmed nor denied, “If we could kill you back then, we would have done so. Now that you’ve come here yourself, that gives us an opportunity to do so.”

Zhao Changhe smiled but did not respond.

Xue Canghai did not press further and instead asked, “So, why have you come? It’s surely not just to catch up with Instructor Sun, right?”

Zhao Changhe replied, “I did want to see Instructor Sun. It’s been a while, after all.”

Instructor Sun turned his head away.

Do you even believe that yourself?

Xue Canghai remained impassive. “Now that you’ve seen him, should I arrange a room for you two to catch up?”

Zhao Changhe: “...”

Xue Canghai sipped his tea, remaining silent.

By now, even the most ardent fans would have realized that Zhao Changhe did not come with pure intentions. They realized that he had likely come to challenge the cult leader, and Xue Canghai obviously understood this much from the start.

He knew that Zhao Changhe was likely at the threshold of the Profound Mysteries. To break through, he needed more than just his talent. His fundamental cultivation techniques were the Vicious Blood Art and Vicious Blood Saber Art, and his way to breakthrough could only be found here, so his visit was inevitable.

However, Zhao Changhe was not Vermillion Bird. Entering this den of demons alone and expecting to leave unscathed if a fight broke out was incredibly bold.

Xue Canghai admired this courage but was not willing to be made a stepping stone.

These damn youngsters. First, it was that Yue girl, using me to boost her reputation and turning me into a laughingstock. Then, there was that young man who ran around wanting to challenge me, unhappy that I could make it onto the Ranking of Man while he couldn't. When he finally made it onto the Ranking of Man, he settled down, but then that asshole Situ Xiao began challenging me just because he was unhappy that I ranked above him.

What the hell did I do to deserve this? Are they all crazy?

Zhao Changhe took a sip of his tea, seemingly unconcerned. "It seems that you're aware of my purpose here. I seek the Profound Mysteries."

Xue Canghai said coldly, "Regardless of how people view your relationship with the Blood God Cult, the core techniques of the cult cannot be shared. As for being allowed to comprehend the sacred artifact, you have no right."

Zhao Changhe shook his head. "The cultivation techniques belong to you, and the sacred artifact is for your cultivation. Yet, it seems you still haven't broken through to the Profound Mysteries. This suggests that those things are, at best, auxiliary. Relying on them too much is unwise."

Xue Canghai was taken aback. "So what do you want?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you likely abandoned the Blood God Art and resumed cultivating according to the Vicious Blood Art in order to get the recognition of the Tome of Troubled Times and enter the Ranking of Man. Otherwise, with your previous combat ability that was at most on par with Yue Hongling when she was at the eighth layer of the Profound Gate, you would not have made it onto the Ranking of Man."

Xue Canghai's face darkened. "You could have left out that last part."

Damn it, not only did these youngsters put me in a tough spot, but the Tome of Troubled Times did too. I secretly raised my strength, thinking that no one would know and I could surprise them, but I wasn't even able to hide it for a couple of days when I was suddenly added to the Ranking of Man, and everyone and their mother found out.

What's even more frustrating is that even after switching to the Vicious Blood Art, I'm still unable to unlock the Profound Mysteries. The backlash from the vicious blood qi still tortures me, nearly costing me my life every now and then. Was all this really worth it?

Zhao Changhe said, "I believe you're likely at the threshold just like me. I don't need your manuals or artifacts. I only seek a thorough battle with you. Perhaps through mutual verification, we can both step through the door of the Profound Mysteries."

Xue Canghai let out an exasperated laugh. "So, in the end, you think I'm an easy target?"

"No, I'm not sure I can beat you. Your mastery and understanding of the Blood God Cult's techniques are unparalleled. I came with the mindset of seeking your guidance."

"And why should I indulge you?"

Zhao Changhe set down his teacup and replied calmly, "Because I am Zhao Changhe."

Xue Canghai's eyes narrowed.

"My mastery of the techniques of the cult is not as refined as yours, but I have drawn a lot of insights from various sources," said Zhao Changhe. "I lack depth in vicious blood, while you have immersed yourself in it only too much. I believe that if we learn from each other, the Profound Mysteries are within reach."

Xue Canghai's heart skipped a beat.

He had imagined countless reasons for Zhao Changhe's visit, but he had not anticipated this.

Indeed, Zhao Changhe was not a mere young disciple challenging a senior, nor a traitor returning in glory.

He was a renowned martial artist on the cusp of becoming a master. He came seeking to discuss and exchange knowledge on the path of becoming a master.

After a moment of silence, Xue Canghai suddenly asked, "You say I've immersed myself too much. On what basis? Have you studied my martial arts?"

“This is easy to see,” replied Zhao Changhe. “The cultivation techniques of the Blood God Cult are fierce and violent, focusing on nurturing vicious qi through killing. Up to now, have you ever considered that the limitations of this world might be holding you back? That if you could carry out mass slaughter, you could make it through the door to the Profound Mysteries.?”

Xue Canghai slowly said, “Go on.”

“But have you not realized that the essence of the ancient demon god’s will is neither killing nor nurturing vicious qi? It’s a domineering spirit that transcends even gods and demons, a self-reflective challenge to the heavens, a worldview where the underworld reflects one’s inner strength. When the Heavenly Dao dies, who will embody it? Was the demon god’s only desire truly just slaughter?”

Xue Canghai stood up, his expression extremely solemn.

Zhao Changhe touched his ring, and with a swift motion, Dragon Bird appeared in his hand, and he pointed it at Xue Canghai. “I’ve said all that needs to be said. Cult Leader Xue... shall we verify our theories?”

Chapter 357: The Duel Begins

The atmosphere in the hall suddenly became tense. The guards were sweating profusely as they watched Zhao Changhe draw his saber, unsure whether they should step in to stop him.

It did not seem to them like Zhao Changhe was confronting the cult leader with hostility. It felt more like he wanted to have a sparring match. It was akin to a public duel on a bustling street, where others could watch with admiration rather than being offended. A well-fought match often ended in mutual respect.

This kind of internal challenge was even more private than a public duel. Zhao Changhe had first offered guidance, clarifying that what he was after was mutual verification. It seemed like nothing more than a sparring match within an ordinary martial sect, and the outcome was thus unlikely to be announced by the Tome of Troubled Times.

Instructor Sun suddenly had a thought: Could this guy be acting so gracefully and generously on purpose? Could it be that he’s doing all this because he doesn’t want to replace Cult Leader Xue on the rankings and end up being laughed at by his wife?

Clearly, others would not think of this. In fact, at this moment, Xue Canghai felt deeply moved. He took a deep breath and said seriously, “Young Hero Zhao, if you don’t mind, you and I can spar in the grand martial arena. That way, the others can observe and learn from our battle.”

Zhao Changhe reversed his grip on his saber and cupped his hand. “Cult Leader Xue, you truly are a respectable leader.”

Xue Canghai slightly shook his head and gestured, “Please.”

A nearby cult member urgently whispered, “Cult leader, the envoy from the Maitreya Cult...”

Xue Canghai blinked. He had almost forgotten about the presence of the envoy.

However, he did not see it as a big deal. The envoy from the Maitreya Cult was in the cult’s secret chambers and would not know about what was going on outside. He whispered instructions to the cult member beside him, “Send a few people to make sure that the envoy does not wander around. And remember, do not mention that Zhao Changhe is here.”

The cult member looked a little distressed, “But cult leader, we want to watch the battle too.”

Xue Canghai chuckled. “With your level of cultivation and understanding of saber arts, what good would that do to you? This is why you should have trained diligently in the past, trying to catch up now is pointless. Now go.”

He again gestured to Zhao Changhe. “A minor matter has delayed me. Let us continue.”

Zhao Changhe had heard the words “envoy from the Maitreya Cult” but simply did not care. He returned the polite gesture. “Please, lead the way.”

When they reached the grand martial arena, Zhao Changhe realized that the layout of the mountain stronghold at Beimang was modeled after his place, but this place was simply much larger. The martial arena here was large enough to accommodate thousands of people training at once, ensuring that no one would be accidentally injured during the fight. The surrounding area was packed with onlookers, their numbers seemingly endless.[1] Hmm, given the crowd, this at least means there aren’t any traps here... Fuck, there are at least ten thousand of them!

The Blood God Cult had been secretly growing to such an extent that they could rise up at any moment.

Where did they get their resources and supplies? Did they raid the granaries of nearby counties?

No wonder an envoy from the Maitreya Cult was sent here. The Blood God Cult is clearly a well-developed rebel force. The problem is, they must have received support from Vermillion Bird. Vermillion Bird is a rebel herself, and she supports the cult so that she can use them when the time is right. Does the Maitreya Cult think they can actually use them? Hah, wishful thinking...

Zhao Changhe did not bother to think too much about it. There were more important things on his mind—this was actually the first time in his life that he was going to be part of a grand public duel like this.

Shng!

Xue Canghai drew his saber and said, “This saber is named Blood God, and it’s forged with... uh...”

He paused and laughed. “Never mind. I was going to say that it’s forged with materials and forging techniques best suited to our cult’s martial arts, but since you already pointed out some things, that doesn’t seem to mean much now. Although I don’t entirely agree with your views, I’ll use this saber to verify my path.”

Zhao Changhe did not introduce Dragon Bird. It did not need an introduction. He just stood there, holding his saber, quietly observing the blood-red blade in Xue Canghai’s hand.

A spring breeze blew, but the atmosphere instantly became deadly.

Swoosh!

In the next moment, as if they had planned it, both of them swung their sabers horizontally, at the same time.

The Vicious Blood Saber Art, unlike other martial arts, did not have any ceremonial moves like “Welcoming Pine.”[2] Every single one of its moves was aimed to kill.

Both of them used the first move of the Vicious Blood Saber Art, which could be considered a starting salute. This move had no name, but it could be seen as an advanced version of a basic horizontal slash, containing more follow-up variations and energy-utilizing techniques than basic saber arts. The differences in this move among various schools lay in these follow-up actions.

Although Zhao Changhe's moves now seemed completely free, there was actually still a pattern. His foundation was in the Vicious Blood Art, and his follow-up variations and energy-utilizing techniques were based on its principles. An expert could discern his roots in the Vicious Blood Art after just a few moves.

Studying someone's martial techniques and figuring out how to counter them works the same way. Every move they make will follow certain patterns, and with proper preparation, you can anticipate their following moves and obtain the upper hand.

In a duel between fellow practitioners with comparable cultivation levels, it all came down to who had mastered the saber art more thoroughly.

Before the eyes of the crowd, the two sabers clashed.

The most puzzling thing for the spectators was that, although this was just the first move, both men's eyes turned red at the moment of contact, and their sabers emitted a red glow. Xue Canghai's originally blood-red blade shone a brilliant scarlet, while Zhao Changhe's previously dull blade glowed with a dark red light.

"Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!" someone exclaimed in a low voice. "How are they able to exhibit the effects of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas without actually using that move?"

Clang!

There was no way to pause for an explanation. The two sabers clashed forcefully. Before that spectator could even finish saying his sentence, the sabers had already clashed a dozen times, each strike ringing out loudly.

At that moment, Instructor Sun explained to the others, "Their Scattering the Gods and Buddhas has transcended the requirement of using specific moves. As long as they have the intent to use it, each one of their strikes is able to embody the effects of the technique."

If Zhao Changhe heard this question, he would explain it in more modern terms: My Scattering the Gods and Buddhas has become a kind of buff, increasing my attack power by 20%, with a special fear effect.

The basis of this was the use of vicious qi. When Xue Canghai still practiced the Blood God Art, he could not infuse every strike with Scattering the Gods and Buddhas, and his combat power had been much lower than it was now.

High-level observers like Instructor Sun and other skilled practitioners could see that while Xue Canghai's and Zhao Changhe's saber intents seemed identical, there were subtle differences between them.

This was exactly the distinction that Zhao Changhe had mentioned earlier.

Xue Canghai's Scattering the Gods and Buddhas was bloody and violent, with a deep and malevolent vicious qi. Just looking at it from a distance struck people with heart-pounding fear. Those with lower cultivation or weaker nerves could not even bear to look, and they averted their gazes.

In the earlier stages, Zhao Changhe's Scattering the Gods and Buddhas had a similar nature, though less bloody as he had not killed as many people. Nevertheless, the fear effect and sudden burst of power were enough to turn the tide in many battles.

But now, Zhao Changhe's saber had subtle differences from Xue Canghai's, as well as from his past self.

The bloodthirstiness and ferocity in his saber were comparatively muted, and his blood-red eyes were not as terrifying as Xue Canghai's. If Xue Canghai seemed like a bloodthirsty demon god striking with ferocity and anger, Zhao Changhe was more like... not a demon god, but a man standing on a battlefield filled with corpses and rivers of blood, the landscape around him a vast expanse of red, and the stars in the sky far above observing him silently.

Among the stars, a god's eye appeared faintly, looking coldly at the slaughter that had been carried out on the battlefield. To the gods and demons, human lives were no more special than grass, their struggles mere entertainment for the bored.

So amidst the sea of corpses and blood, the man still standing raised his wild saber, not to cut down his fellow man, but to strike at the heavens.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Bang!

A thunderous explosion resounded, and the two separated in the arena.

Zhao Changhe took three steps back.

Xue Canghai took five steps back, his expression filled with extreme shock. At the same time, he seemed to fall into contemplation.

At that moment, he was like a demon god, while Zhao Changhe seemed to embody the essence of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas.

He began to truly wonder with which intent that technique was supposed to be carried out.

Chapter 358: The Protagonist of the Tome of Troubled Times

Judging solely by the power displayed and the broader perspective demonstrated at that moment, it seemed that Zhao Changhe might indeed be correct.

However, both Xue Canghai and Zhao Changhe frowned, both of them dissatisfied with the outcome.

Zhao Changhe was naturally endowed with greater strength because of his Blood Asura Body, yet he had only managed to push Xue Canghai back by two steps more—much less than he expected. Furthermore, he himself had been forced back three steps. The terrifying vicious qi from Xue Canghai, filled with fierce and violent bloodlust, suppressed his own vicious qi, making it feel somewhat weakened.

The two stared at each other in silence for a while. Then, Xue Canghai suddenly asked, “Are you sure that the intent you spoke of isn’t just derived from the name of the technique, as a literal interpretation of it?”

Zhao Changhe understood why Xue Canghai would ask such a question. Excluding the influence of his unique physique and considering only the inherent power of the strike itself, it seemed that Xue Canghai should have had the upper hand.

He was not here to rely on his unique physique to challenge someone on the Ranking of Man; he was here to refine his understanding of the vicious blood qi. Making Xue Canghai retreat two more steps was meaningless.

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and said softly, “Even if it is a literal interpretation, it is the path I wish to take. I do not desire bloody, violent slaughter. Frankly, it does not suit me. On the other hand, I find the will to scatter the gods and Buddhas much more appealing. The Profound Mysteries are about understanding, not rigidly following those before us.”

Xue Canghai’s eyes once again revealed admiration. He sighed and said, “Very well. Take this then!”

A streak of blood-red light sliced through the sky, reaching Zhao Changhe’s throat in an instant from eight steps away!

Zhao Changhe shifted his foot, using Traceless Soaring Blood to move half a step to the side. He held Dragon Bird slanted to deflect the strike, deliberately avoiding using his brute strength to overpower his opponent and focusing purely on his integration and understanding of various techniques.

To the onlookers, what had seemingly started as a simple contest of strength quickly transformed into a comprehensive and intricate display of technical attainments. The techniques of the two began to diverge.

Although the techniques of the Blood God Cult did not emphasize feints, tricks, or elaborate routines, there were still differences in individual applications.

Intuitively, one might expect that Zhao Changhe, using a larger, heavier Dragon Bird, would employ slower, more powerful strikes. Yet it was the exact opposite; his moves were quicker, with more variations, constantly probing Xue Canghai for weaknesses.

In contrast, though Xue Canghai used the Blood God Saber, which was only slightly heavier than a regular saber, he swept it with the ferocity of a dragon, generating immense, violent power. Even if there were flaws in his technique, they were obscured by the overwhelming force with which he swung his blade, a force that made it difficult for anyone to get close.

Xue Canghai's vicious blood qi was nearly tangible, forming a wall of energy that not only enhanced his strength but also created an oppressive aura. In contrast, Zhao Changhe's vicious blood qi, though weaker in comparison, manifested as precise, needle-like stabs, seeking to break through and dispel Xue Canghai's wall of energy.

The sound of their sabers clashing was relentless. Blood-red light filled the air and the oppressive vicious qi forced some of the surrounding cult members to step back, further clearing the area.

"So strong," someone murmured. "To think that he's just been practicing the Vicious Blood Saber Art for a year.... We've been training for twenty years, and it feels like we've just wasted our time."

"That's just how geniuses are. But actually, if you look closely, Zhao Changhe's Vicious Blood Saber Art still appears somewhat immature. At least, it's certainly not as refined as the cult leader's. The cult leader's moves may seem broad and simple, but the transitions are incredibly sophisticated, and he looks like an impregnable fortress... If he fought Yue Hongling like this back then, he would not have lost."

"Don't mention Yue Hongling, or the cult leader might kill you if he hears."

"Zhao Changhe himself admitted his lack of expertise when it comes to vicious blood qi, and it shows," remarked an elder. "If he was still part of the cult, his saber art would have warranted a few words of advice from me here and there."

Instructor Sun glanced at him and said, "If he had stayed in the cult, he would not have developed this style."

"I'm not talking about his lack of mastery over vicious blood qi. It's understandable that his vicious qi isn't intense since he isn't naturally bloodthirsty and hasn't killed all that many people. I'm referring to his actual saber art. It's quite lacking and he heavily relies on traits from other martial arts to compensate. He has breadth but lacks depth. He has not fully grasped the essence of saber arts. Hell, he even shows sword intent at times. While this might make him strong in actual combat, it doesn't help his understanding of saber arts."

Instructor Sun had to concede. “That makes sense. Without a higher-level manual, he had to learn from various other martial arts, integrating them into his techniques. His style would naturally differ from those who have always practiced our cult’s techniques. In a real fight, I wouldn’t stand a chance against him, but if we’re only looking at his mastery over the Vicious Blood Art, you and I can indeed critique him. After all, he’s really been practicing it for just a little over a year.”

Indeed, only a little over a year, yet he can fight the cult leader to a standstill. As much as it might sting, we have to admit, not only is he a genius, but he’s also incredibly diligent. Who knows how much he trained to get to this point.

The high-ranking members of the cult watched intently. It was easy to criticize Zhao Changhe’s unrefined saber arts as spectators, but if they faced such a saber in battle, they knew deep down the number of moves they could defend against.

And that number was probably zero.

Zhao Changhe was aware of his own shortcomings. He knew that he was lacking in his mastery over vicious blood. He was here precisely to make up for this deficiency.

For instance, Zhao Changhe’s method of deflecting and then striking again involved borrowing some of his opponent’s force while conserving some of his own. By the second strike, his power increased by fifty percent. Repeating this, his attacks grew increasingly fierce, creating the impression of an unstoppable river.

This technique was not part of Blood God Cult’s repertoire but rather belonged to the Sword Emperor. It was Underworld River Surges. Zhao Changhe used to have to integrate actual sword arts into his saber arts, but now, having grasped the essence of the art, he could achieve the same effect with any weapon.

On the surface, Zhao Changhe’s understanding of martial arts could already be said to be at the level of a master. Yet, Yuxu believed he lacked sufficient combat experience, and the blind woman thought that he had not taken enough beatings.

Both perspectives were valid.

Take Underworld River Surges, for instance; it was effective, but how long could he keep stacking it? A truly experienced and powerful opponent would not give him the chance to do so. Xue Canghai, for one, sensed the borrowed force in one strike and immediately adjusted, tightening his

power on the next, making it impossible for Zhao Changhe to borrow any more. This made Zhao Changhe's subsequent strikes seem weaker while Xue Canghai's momentum surged.

The unstoppable force had become Xue Canghai instead.

Even Zhao Changhe's use of the Spring Water Sword Intent, a technique that relied on refraction to deceive the eye, had no effect on Xue Canghai. He saw through it instantly, and his counterattack almost severed Zhao Changhe's fingers.

Zhao Changhe could not help but admire Xue Canghai. Cult Leader Xue always seemed like a pushover in the rumors, but Zhao Changhe now understood from direct experience that the Ranking of Troubled Times hadn't recognized the man for nothing.

In terms of the precision and sophistication of his saber art, his rich combat experience, and his effortless control of energy, Cult Leader Xue was indeed above countless others.

This battle was incredibly beneficial for Zhao Changhe as he faced an opponent that used a saber art and a cultivation technique from the same origin. The other party demonstrated a different but more experienced display of the same methods. He showed how to use vicious blood qi, and how to use the saber.

Trying to manipulate his opponent's energy flow did not work. Instead, it was his own energy that surged wildly. The intent to instill fear had no effect on himself or his opponent.

A year of cleaving his way through the jianghu would not have been as significant as this battle. Zhao Changhe could clearly feel his understanding of the Vicious Blood Saber Art, as well as his grasp of energy and vicious blood qi, advancing to a new level.

No wonder I couldn't break through to the Profound Mysteries. My foundational techniques weren't just missing a final push; they were missing a serious number of kicks forward!

"Your Vicious Blood Saber... is severely lacking."

Xue Canghai's voice pulled Zhao Changhe from his reverie.

Unbeknownst to him, dusk had fallen. The blood-red hue of the Blood God Saber, under the evening sun, made the whole world seem like it had been drenched in blood.

At the moment when Zhao Changhe attempted to manipulate Xue Canghai's energy and was countered, Xue Canghai found his opening.

“Whether it's your vicious blood qi or your saber art, if this is the extent of your mastery, then I can only say that you don't seem to live up to the title of first hidden dragon.”

Xue Canghai's voice seemed to come from the horizon, a sign that he had seized Zhao Changhe's mind.

In Zhao Changhe's eyes, there was no sunset, no setting sun. A blood-red demon god towered over the heavens and earth and stood in a sea of blood. With a blood-red sky overhead and a blood-red blade in hand, he dominated the world. Even a vast army would be cut in half by this blade!

This was his hell, a sea of blood and a mountain of blades!

This was Xue Canghai's... Hell on Earth.

Such a saber intent could not have been achieved without having killed thousands... no, tens of thousands!

Boom!

A thunderous crash echoed as Zhao Changhe, with his vicious blood qi surging uncontrollably, was caught in a vulnerable moment. Unable to withstand the power of the strike, he spat a mouthful of blood and was flung backward.

Xue Canghai instinctively followed up with another sweeping strike.

If there were no unexpected developments, then this battle would soon come to an end... It was exhilarating, but Zhao Changhe's performance as the first hidden dragon left Xue Canghai somewhat disappointed.

Even though he knew that Zhao Changhe deliberately held back on many of his ultimate techniques, like the terrifying power of his physique, Xue Canghai still felt disappointed. This was, after all, not a contest for victory but a mutual verification of theories meant to allow them to learn from one another and possibly break through to the Profound Mysteries together. However, what had played out seemed far from being able to achieve that goal.

As this thought flashed through his mind, Zhao Changhe lightly tapped the ground of the arena and rebounded, striking back with his saber.

From the perspective of the spectators, it seemed as though the dazzling blood-red light momentarily blinded Zhao Changhe, causing him to squint before he reopened his eyes and refocused his gaze.

In Xue Canghai's vision, the blood-red sky cracked open with two seams.

One like the sun, the other like the moon.

Then, the stars shone brightly, covering the sky.

Countless stars poured down like a celestial river pouring down from the heavens.

"I told you... If your vision is that of the Blood God, then I shall scatter it!"

Boom!

Zhao Changhe's straight slash collided with Xue Canghai's horizontal sweep. The clash of their sabers created the illusion of an earthquake.

The sea of blood vanished, and the stars reversed their course.

This was not Zhao Changhe's Hell on Earth... He was still using Scattering the Gods and Buddhas.

He delivered it in its purest, original form, with its signature leaping strike.

This time, it was Xue Canghai who was forced back, even though Zhao Changhe had not used the immense strength that came with the Blood Asura Body.

The spectators were stunned, unable to comprehend how Zhao Changhe managed to recover and unleash such a powerful strike while retreating.

Meanwhile, Xue Canghai's eyes lit up with joy.

This is it...

This strike truly reflects the essence of Scattering the Gods and Buddhas. It's a roar in the face of adversity! Resisting and struggling even under divine pressure!

When I was weaker, when did I use this move? Was it not always in moments of desperation?

Indeed...

In Xue Canghai's eyes, a silhouette also appeared behind Zhao Changhe.

It was neither god nor demon.

With sun and moon as the eyes, a river of stars as the body, winding like a dragon, pouring like a river.

A sweeping strike, as gentle as the breeze. Between heaven and earth, no gods, no demons, no self.

The air seemed to stand still, all things ceased to exist, empty and serene, vast and distant.

This was Zhao Changhe's version of No Man's Land and Hell on Earth.

Boom!

Another terrifying clash rang out, the impact so intense that the surrounding cult members were forced to move even further back.

By now, Instructor Sun and the elder were dumbfounded, unable to provide any commentary. This level of power was already beyond their comprehension.

Amidst the blood-red scene, they saw Xue Canghai being forced back by Zhao Changhe's strike. His entire body bent backward, and the Blood God's apparition behind him gradually faded. Yet, Xue Canghai began to laugh, his laughter growing louder and louder. "I understand now."

Boom!

The apparition of the Blood God suddenly expanded, towering over the heavens and treading the sea of blood.

"You're right. Perhaps that was what the Blood God thought before the collapse of the era. He was resisting, making his voice heard..." Blood seeped from the corners of Xue Canghai's mouth, but his eyes turned frenzied. "The Blood God Cult has rage but lacks spirit... Being suppressed by a mere woman, unable to resist, that's why I've been stuck at the threshold."

"I follow the path of the Blood God. No Man's Land!"

Xue Canghai roared, and an overwhelming force surged, pushing Zhao Changhe back.

Xue Canghai stood tall, the Blood God's apparition behind him reaching the sky and standing over the sea of blood.

"So that's all it took to step through the door of the Profound Mysteries."

Xue Canghai had broken through to the Profound Mysteries.

Zhao Changhe was stunned.

This isn't how mutual verification is supposed to go... How did you find a new meaning randomly and actually break through? And what about me? Fuck, I still haven't figured it out yet! This isn't fair...

People joke that Cult Leader Xue is the protagonist of the Tome of Troubled Times. Don't tell me...

In the next moment, Zhao Changhe was left even more speechless, and the entire arena was dumbfounded.

Xue Canghai dropped to one knee and said softly, "I pursue the Blood God's path, but I know I'm not the Blood God. However, you... You're at least his representative or spokesperson, and you are worthy of being referred to as the cult's saint."

Zhao Changhe's jaw hit the ground.

What are you saying? Didn't you just say that you were troubled after being suppressed by a woman? Why are you suddenly kneeling to me?

"Your explanations of the Blood God's will are correct, or at least they align with his final will," Xue Canghai said seriously. "And more importantly, I sensed the aura of the Blood God on you. How else could someone who has practiced for only a little over a year understand the Blood God's will and help me break through a barrier I've been stuck at for thirteen years? There's no evidence clearer than this."

Zhao Changhe suddenly remembered the blood token he had bought for a penny from Ying Five.

The Blood God Cult was a cult, it was devoted to a god and had faith. It was not a martial sect. Xue Canghai was pursuing the footsteps of an ancient demon god, not seeking to replace his intent.

Zhao Changhe stared blankly at the kneeling Xue Canghai, thinking, Should I actually try playing as the Night Emperor and make Vermillion Bird kneel to me too?

Chapter 359: The Saint Returns

Xue Canghai was sincere in his actions.

He bowed to Zhao Changhe in front of everyone, just as Zhao Changhe had done so toward Instructor Sun earlier. This was no longer a matter of face or pride; he simply believed that this was the right thing to do.

While Zhao Changhe was still in a daze, the cult members were quicker to react. They kneeled down in waves, collectively cheering, "Greetings to the saint!"

The sheer joy in their voices and on their faces was palpable. They had always idolized Zhao Changhe, even if it was one-sided. Zhao Changhe might have thought they were foolish, but now that even their cult leader had acknowledged the other party, their idol had truly become one of their own. It was like they were fans discovering that their greatest idol was actually their cousin.

Zhao Changhe stood there, surrounded by the kneeling crowd, feeling a strong urge to scratch his head but restrained himself. He now had an image to maintain, and scratching his head would not help in maintaining a dignified image.

He had to admit that it boosted his ego quite a bit.

No wonder so many people want to be on top. The feeling of having countless people bowing to you... I can see how some would particularly enjoy this.

Xue Canghai, meanwhile, was starting to feel an itch. Hey, why is this guy spacing out? I've been kneeling for quite a while now.

Finally coming back to his senses, Zhao Changhe stepped forward to help Xue Canghai up and sighed. "What if I say I don't want to be the saint?"

Xue Canghai rose with his assistance, then pointed to Instructor Sun and smiled slightly, "Since you still acknowledge that you have ties with the cult... It does not matter whether or not you officially accept the title of saint. As long as we consider you our cult's saint and we don't deny it, it's the same as before when the members of the cult saw you as one of their own and you didn't deny it."

Zhao Changhe could not help but ask, "But why go through all this trouble? Isn't this just putting yourself under someone else's control?"

Xue Canghai replied calmly, "There's always someone above me, so what difference does it make?"

Zhao Changhe tilted his head in confusion.

Xue Canghai explained quietly, “We follow this faith because we believe that the path of the Blood God is truly powerful, and we hold this belief without doubt. But over the years, the Blood God Cult has declined. Sure, partly it’s due to my failures. However, a major reason is the loss of our inheritance, leaving no one able to comprehend the Blood God’s true will. Without understanding that will, how can we seek strength?”

Zhao Changhe nodded. Many knowledgeable people had already told him that the Blood God Cult’s heritage was incomplete, and the cult’s decline could not all be pinned on Cult Leader Xie. And indeed, seeing him today, Zhao Changhe realized that Xue Canghai was in fact quite capable.

It was no wonder that Xue Canghai was eager to acknowledge Zhao Changhe, as he saw the other party as a beacon of hope for the Blood God Cult.

“The completeness of the Blood God’s true will surpasses all else. If you truly understand it, then you are the saint. There’s nothing wrong with acknowledging that. Besides, the saint is not the cult leader. Our responsibilities are different.”

Zhao Changhe said, “I don’t even know if I can fulfill such a role. I haven’t seen your sacred artifact, so how can I take responsibility?”

Xue Canghai responded, “Why not give it a try? You don’t have to accept the title of saint, but I believe you do need our manuals and the insights you can get from the sacred artifact. After that, we can discuss further.”

“Why do I need them?”

“Because your Vicious Blood Art is incomplete and unrefined. Without integrating other martial arts, you would not have gotten this far. No matter how many times we spar, you’ll only be polishing a turd. You came here with the intention of getting that final push, but look at what happened. Don’t you feel like you’re seriously lacking in a few aspects?”

“Mm...” Zhao Changhe finally stopped arguing, sighing internally once again.

As a religious cult, their logic differed from other factions. For example, the sacred artifact was absolutely not to be desecrated by outsiders. Even Vermillion Bird had never crossed that line. Otherwise, it would have turned into an endless enmity rather than a mere subjugation of the Blood God Cult. The members of the Blood God Cult may superficially submit to strength, but there would have been countless future troubles awaiting the Four Idols Cult. It would have been nothing like their current relationship.

If Zhao Changhe wanted to touch the so-called “sacred artifact,” conventional methods would work. He had to join the cult, earn recognition, and be granted access over time. But now, as the saint and the Blood God’s representative, he was the one who dictated who touched the artifact and who didn’t. The cult leader merely handled administrative duties.

With mixed feelings, Zhao Changhe said softly, “Let’s have everyone return to their duties first. This is getting out of hand.”

Xue Canghai waved his hand authoritatively. “Hey, do you have nothing to do? Did you all gain insights from our battle? Go back and study then! I will assess your progress tomorrow!”

The cult members bowed and dispersed. “Yes, sir. Saint, take care.”

Zhao Changhe sighed.

The cult’s belief system was truly powerful. Now he could understand some of Vermillion Bird’s seemingly inexplicable behavior. For instance, when Vermillion Bird suspected his star chart to be related to the Night Emperor, her attitude toward him changed instantly. She even sent the Fire Serpent of Yi to probe and get close to him, trying to figure him out. Later, when he found out that his star chart was not actually related to the Night Emperor, it was already too late, as the Fire Serpent of Yi had already fallen in love.

Even now, Chichi held some of that reverence. While they saw the four idols to be replaceable, they revered the Night Emperor as if he was a true god.

“Follow me.” Xue Canghai dismissed the onlookers and personally led Zhao Changhe to the cult’s secret chamber. He asked softly, “There’s still an envoy from the Maitreya Cult to be dealt with. How do we proceed?”

His eyes flashed with a fierce glint as he made a slicing motion with his hand. “Should we sacrifice him to our god?”

Zhao Changhe hesitated. “An envoy from the Maitreya Cult? What does he want?”

“He wants us to march east to Xiangyang[1].”

Zhao Changhe immediately understood. Xiangyang was a strategic military location, and it was geographically significant.

Xue Canghai commanded an army of over ten thousand. They were all infantry without horses, but the fact of the matter was that each of them was a genuine martial artist, far better than the various believers that the Maitreya Cult had tricked into following them. A force of such size suddenly entering the war could have an immeasurable impact.

But the Blood God Cult has long since become a strategic resource under Vermillion Bird. There's no way the Maitreya Cult doesn't know this.

Zhao Changhe calmly asked, “What are your thoughts on this?”

Xue Canghai said, “I don't want to be under the Four Idols Cult forever. I do want to find a way out... but the Maitreya Cult isn't a reliable partner. I doubt their chances of success. Since you're here, there's no longer any need to hesitate. You have a big grudge against the Maitreya Cult, so I have no problem if you tell me to just kill him.”

Zhao Changhe pondered for a moment and then smiled. “Would you like to play the role of a non-believer, Cult Leader?”

Xue Canghai replied coolly, “We are a demonic cult. Whether we have faith or not depends on practicality.”

“Then agree to their proposal. Set up detailed terms of cooperation, including the timing of the attack. The more specific the plans are, the better.”

Xue Canghai smiled, “Understood.”

There was no need for further explanation. As expected, like understands like.

Xue Canghai thought, Who the hell said this guy's a hero? His heart's as black as coal. Heh, as expected of someone from our Blood God Cult.

Zhao Changhe also realized that, despite their bond, the Blood God Cult was not a reliable ally either with their bloodthirsty nature... Wait, isn't that what being the saint is about as well?

Both of them lost in their respective thoughts, they entered the underground chamber, Zhao Changhe clearly felt the familiar sensation of passing through a spatial barrier.

"This was once a secret realm. The sacred artifact was found here," Xue Canghai explained. "We didn't occupy Wushan; it was always here."

Zhao Changhe nodded. "During the collapse of the era, the array plate should have held the space together, but it's not a single unit. The array plate is made up of various objects pieced together, causing many components to break away. This is one of the reasons why the cult's inheritance ended up incomplete."

Xue Canghai's eyes widened. You still dare say you aren't the saint? Then how do you know that the sacred artifact is an array plate and that it's fragmented?

His expression turned reverent again. He led Zhao Changhe to the end of the passage.

Several high-ranking protectors, each at the sixth or seventh layer of the Profound Gate, stood guard at the door. Seeing Xue Canghai approach, they bowed deeply. "Cult leader."

Xue Canghai nodded. "Open the door."

One of them activated a mechanism, and the heavy stone door slowly opened.

A wave of vicious blood qi hit Zhao Changhe, making him hold his breath. In the dim red light, a massive array plate rested at an angle on the central altar, facing the entrance.

At first glance, it looked like the eye of a god, coldly staring at the worshippers.

Zhao Changhe felt two items in his ring react simultaneously.

One was the blood bead he had obtained from Maitreya, identified by the blind woman as part of the array plate, from which he had once extracted vicious qi to break through.

The other was the blood token he had bought from Ying Five for a single coin. He had never studied it thoroughly, but now it resonated intensely with the array plate, vibrating incessantly.

At the same time, the array plate began to glow with a blood-red light. It was as if the cold eye had come to life, like an old guardian recognizing a long-lost child returning home.

Chapter 360: Ancient Fury

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and stepped forward slowly.

The altar was not tall; it was low and wide. It was surrounded by a pool of blood filled with an unknown quantity of blood. The pool released a pungent metallic smell. Blood circled the altar, with strange blood-red patterns extending toward the central array plate, seemingly nourishing it.

This blood seems like it's human blood. Who knows how many people have been killed just to get this amount of blood... But it doesn't seem fresh. It seems that the Blood God Cult's killings have reduced over the years. Most of this blood should have been collected a good while back.

Whether such offerings worked, Zhao Changhe could not tell. He wondered if the sacred artifact could get angry.

Suppressing his disgust, Zhao Changhe stepped onto the narrow bridge over the blood.

The nature of the Blood God Cult had always been like this. Things had improved over the years, and criticizing it was rather pointless. If he could become the interpreter of the cult's doctrines, then he could steer it toward a better path.

If they had to kill, then why not kill evil spirits or enemy forces? Why harm innocent and weak people to show off their prowess?

This is something that can be changed over time.

As he stepped past the blood and stood before the array plate, its glow intensified. The desire of the token and bead to return “home” was apparent, and it almost led them to break out of the confines of his ring.

Zhao Changhe ignored them and carefully examined the plate.

It was difficult to determine the material the plate was made of, but it somewhat resembled bone. But where and from what kind of being could such a large piece of bone be acquired?

The main body was intact, with only minor cracks. The missing pieces were mainly inlaid elements, creating gaps that disrupted the array’s integrity. Many of these inlays were bead-like, and it was unclear where his bead might fit.

At the center of the array plate was a square slot, likely intended for the blood token. It seemed more like a key than a functional part of the array.

Despite the missing pieces, the main structure was complete. It was clear that the creator had poured their everything into the creation of the artifact, embedding the philosophy of their martial arts into it. Anyone who spent enough time with it could likely develop a comprehensive martial art from studying it.

As someone with the Heavenly Tome, Zhao Changhe did not need others’ interpretations. He could use the tome to understand everything clearly.

Closing his eyes, Zhao Changhe gently touched the array plate, linking his mind and spirit with the Heavenly Tome.

He then found himself amid a chaotic landscape, with the ground shaking, mountains collapsing, and the sky ablaze. Distant screams echoed as unknown people perished. Amidst the chaos, a heavily injured man sat cross-legged, his legs partially submerged in blood as he calmly worked. He used a thick-bladed saber resembling Xue Canghai’s Blood God Saber to carve the plate.

Cult Leader Xue’s Blood God Saber likely was not the same saber, but rather a replica based on the design of the original.

The man carved the plate and set in inlays, his blood mixing with that of others, soaking into the plate as if he was quite literally using his life to complete this final masterpiece.

The surrounding cataclysm did not affect him. The array plate emitted an invisible barrier, keeping natural disasters at bay.

A loud crash sounded as the barrier broke, and someone stormed in, shouting, “Lie[1]! You stole the bone of the Blood Ao[2] from our tribe, and you still dare to sit here in the wilderness? Do you think our tribe is powerless?”

Zhao Changhe noted the name Lie. Was it typical of the ancient era to use single-character names? Or was this man just unique?

Before he could ponder further, several figures rushed in. Even before they arrived, the saber lights they sent out slashed through space and near-instantly reached Lie’s neck.

Cold sweat broke out on Zhao Changhe’s forehead.

Such fast and powerful saber qi! That strike is comparable to the sword strike that Cui Wenjing made in the sky back then. Could it be that any random martial artist in the ancient era was on par with Cui Wenjing?

A flash of blood light burst forth before his eyes.

The original Blood God Saber, which had been carving the array plate, suddenly turned into a streak of blood. The incoming saber qi was effortlessly neutralized, and the heads of several black-clad figures flew off, turning them into fountains of blood.

Lie, without turning his head, continued carving. “You’re asking why I’m carving this array plate in the wilderness? It’s because I need some sacrifices, and I can’t be bothered looking for them.”

The blood from the fountains of blood quickly pooled into the ground and was absorbed by the array plate. As it absorbed more and more blood, the bone-white plate grew increasingly vibrant.

Such malevolence needed no menacing expression. Lie’s calm demeanor was frightening enough as his murderous intent surged high into the heavens.

Amidst the apocalyptic scenery of lightning, fire, collapsing mountains, and severed rivers... it looked like the world had truly been taken over by hell.

One of the disembodied heads was somehow still alive, and it somehow spoke without vocal cords, "Your blood... is flowing too... Are you also... a sacrifice?"

Lie replied indifferently, "With the heavens falling, does it matter whose blood it is? The world is a furnace, everyone is a sacrifice."

The head fell silent.

"At this point, does it matter who the bone of the Blood Ao belonged to? Were you all just planning to take it to your graves? Fools. If I had the time, I'd kill all of you just to avoid the annoyance."

The head retorted, "You're not strong enough..."

Lie continued carving, "So what? I'm at least strong enough to kill you."

The head fell silent once again.

"You say my strength is not enough, but a single slash still resulted in your death," said Lie proudly. "This slash will be engraved in the essence of this array plate. If someone ends up inheriting it in the future, they can derive an entire saber art from this slash and my engraved will... perhaps it could be called... the Vicious Blood Saber Art?"

As he spoke, the blood pool began to churn as if rejoicing.

The head said incredulously, "You... You're still thinking of passing down your skills? Didn't you always claim to live only for this life?"

"People change," Lie answered calmly. "I was a slave. I comprehended the Dao through countless life-and-death battles. No one helped me, no gods favored me. People wanted me to serve them, gods wanted me to kneel... so I killed them all, be they man or god."

Zhao Changhe's heart quivered.

Incredible... A slave comprehending the Dao without a teacher? Was it because of the spirit qi of the previous era or was this person just that much of a genius?

Lie continued, "I forged my own Asura Body, embodying my killing intent, striving to gain control of my life, allowing no one to obstruct me. What did it matter to me what happened after my death? Whether you called me Blood God or Blood Demon, I didn't care about my reputation after my death?"

"...And now?"

"Back then, I wanted nobody to mess with me, but now, I have decided to mess with you." Lie looked up at the blood-colored sky, his once-calm face finally showing the ferocity befitting of the title Blood God. "A sealed heaven, a game between gods and demons. If he dies, the world ends? Why should it?!"

The head blinked.

It could no longer understand what Lie was saying.

Tchk!

Lie made the final engraving, and the blood light of the array plate flared brightly. It seemed that it was complete now.

He carefully embedded the various bits and pieces he carried into the plate, saying, "The world does not need to depend on anyone... If he dies, he dies. At most, the era collapses, but the world remains. If I survive the collapse of the era, I will personally shatter this sky, and I shall scatter the gods and Buddhas."

"And if you don't survive?"

"Then I shall make it so that those who come after me can use my blood to tear open the sky!"

Snap!

With that, Lie inserted a blood token into the plate.

At that moment, the wilderness began to collapse. The sky split open, lightning crashed and thunder boomed, and the fires of hell consumed the earth. The corpses, including the head, were instantly reduced to ash.

Simultaneously, a pillar of blood light shot up from the array plate, piercing the heavens.

“People call themselves Night Emperor or Sword Emperor, thinking they’re gods... yet the Heavenly Dao crumbles, and they all become dust.”

Within the blood light, a figure wielding a saber rose up, slashing at the heavens, “Whatever lies beyond the Heavenly Dao... In this collapsing era, why not slash it open and have a look?!”

Boom!

The entire world turned blood-red, and vision was lost completely.

After an unknown length of time, the sky began to rain blood, softly drenching the land.

The array plate cracked and scattered, its cracks bearing witness to a quixotic fury in an attempt to slash the heavens.

Zhao Changhe was speechless.

Daoist Yuxu, is this what you meant when you said that this demonic god wasn’t very strong? Maybe he wasn’t that strong before, but at this moment, he clearly reached the pinnacle...

Oh right... while the people of the current era see them as demonic gods... but in Lie’s eyes, the gods and Buddhas he wanted to get lost were different beings altogether. Maybe they didn’t even exist... and this engraved slash merely records the struggles of ancient humans.

Zhao Changhe looked at his own body.

Lie had said something earlier... “I forged my own Asura Body.”

It looks like there’s no escaping being the saint now.