

T. Times 361

Chapter 361: Breakthrough, First Layer of the Profound Mysteries

I wonder why I'm seeing this story... It could have just been a phantom or projection of the demonic god demonstrating martial arts, couldn't it?

Maybe it's related to getting the second page of the Heavenly Tome. It's possible that the addition of that page has made it so that I become immersed in the environment of the target, thus revealing the history of the artifact?

I must admit, Cult Leader Xue does not lose any face by worshiping the Blood God. He truly was someone who deserved the reverence of future generations. Of course, faith is another matter. I'm still more willing to accept the role of a successor. I'm quite fond of what he said. "Then I shall make it so that those who come after me can use my blood to tear open the sky..."

The Blood God wanted his successors to inherit this heaven-rending will, but what has the Blood God Cult inherited?

Violence, bloodshed, and slaughter...

Perhaps those indeed reflect the Blood God's temperament, but they are definitely not his essence, or rather, they're a bit outdated.

Well, this isn't really significant to my purpose. I have my own path. Tearing open the sky and defying gods and demons might be what Xia Longyuan and others aim to do, and perhaps it is the path Cult Leader Xue will pursue in the future. However, it does not match mine... at least not for now.

I seek only that one slash.

The slash that the Blood God had unleashed was far beyond Zhao Changhe's current level and it would require him long-term contemplation and comprehension. It encapsulated everything he had learned so far. The entire Vicious Blood Saber Art was derived from it. If he wanted to advance his saber arts to the level of the Profound Mysteries, studying this was certainly the right path.

Zhao Changhe closed his eyes and stood there quietly, repeatedly reflecting on that slash.

He realized that he had two major issues he had to overcome.

First, he was not yet at the stage where he sought to revert complexity to simplicity, becoming one with his saber. He still needed to build a complete system of saber arts from the basics to the advanced levels.

Everyone knew that due to the lack of advanced manuals for the Vicious Blood Art, he was stuck with techniques at the Profound Gate level. It was because of that that he lacked a true understanding of saber arts.

Speaking of techniques themselves, the problem was not just having few moves, but also few ultimate techniques—only three in total. Among them, Scattering the Gods and Buddhas and No Man's Land had become passive buffs, meaning the only active technique he had was Hell on Earth.

This left him with a limited moveset, forcing him to incorporate the Sword Emperor's ultimate techniques as well as other stolen techniques to make up for his lack of techniques. But the issue was that most of the techniques he acquired were sword techniques, with only Hu Lie's Yellow Sand Saber Art being somewhat compatible with his path.

Previously, Cult Leader Xue was limited by his strength, and he couldn't yet use saber techniques at the level of the Profound Mysteries. Because of that, he was using the same techniques as me. However, he has already seen the advanced techniques, or at least gotten an idea of them, understanding a bit of their essence, and his system is complete and coherent. His use of the lower-level techniques is far more refined; how could I even compare?

But now, with the Heavenly Tome, I can study this slash, turning it into a complete saber art even more comprehensive than the manuals compiled by generations of the Blood God Cult.

With just one glance, Zhao Changhe saw the move that followed after Hell on Earth.

Hell on Earth was a horizontal slash, silent and void. The move that followed it was at the Profound Mysteries level, and it was a move that transformed the saber into countless drops of blood that rained down from all over the sky.

That one slash from Lie that decapitated several people simultaneously was the culmination of a group battle technique. In order to have his single saber be able to take on multiple people at once, he first needed to split it up so that it could deliver that attack to multiple targets.

It was also the process of transforming Hell on Earth into myriad forms. And mastering it was the step to reach the Profound Mysteries.

If the empty world was Hell, then this slash made Hell display its true hideousness and horror, with blood covering the mountains and rivers.

This move was called Bloodied Mountains and Rivers. Compared to the previous three ultimate techniques, its name seemed much simpler, yet it served as a new foundation. This ultimate technique built upon the hell that had been split apart, aiming to shatter the heavens above. It mirrored the scenes he had seen earlier: the initial environment, a person in the wilderness, the surroundings collapsing, the sea of blood.

Zhao Changhe stood quietly for a moment before suddenly drawing his saber.

It looked like a single slash, but the surrounding blood pool seemed to be simultaneously struck by countless blades, with blood splashing up from innumerable spots. From a distance, it appeared as if waves were rising in a sea of blood, the waves then going on to surge across the mountains and rivers.

Xue Canghai had been silently observing him from behind. At this moment, he let out a sigh. “Who would believe that he isn’t the saint? He doesn’t even need to look at the manuals. Just standing here for a moment, he comprehends the Profound Mysteries-level Bloodied Mountains and Rivers... That’s a move that our predecessors took years to grasp...”

The protectors nearby were absolutely dumbfounded.

They had access to the Profound Mysteries-level saber techniques, but they could not execute them. Yet, Zhao Changhe, after just a few moments in the secret chamber, and despite his cultivation not being there just yet, was actually able to comprehend the move that transformed one slash into countless strikes.

Moreover, Zhao Changhe had still not broken through. They could only wonder as to how he was able to so casually use it.

Wait, didn't he just see the move for the first time? Even if he gets it, how is he able to use it without even having to practice it? Where did this monster come from?

Meanwhile, the so-called monster sighed. "It's still not enough... I still can't break through..."

Everyone felt on the verge of a heart attack.

Xue Canghai said with a blank expression, "I can't watch this anymore. It's already more than enough for me to confirm that he's the saint. I'll go and deal with that envoy from the Maitreya Cult first."

After saying that, he flicked his sleeves and left.

He suspected that if he continued watching, he might just vomit blood. You already managed to do something so unbelievable, yet you're still complaining about not breaking through? Were you actually planning to just close your eyes for a few moments and break through to the Profound Mysteries?

It was normal for Zhao Changhe to not have broken through. Xue Canghai had already pointed out that he was not lacking just the final step as he had initially imagined. His insights in other areas might be very advanced, but those were different and unrelated to the Vicious Blood Saber Art and the Vicious Blood Art.

Zhao Changhe also knew that he had these problems. While he had pretty much dealt with the part involving the Vicious Blood Saber Art, he still had to find what was missing for the Vicious Blood Art.

Of course, it was the cultivation technique.

His vicious blood qi was not as intense as that of Cult Leader Xue and others. After all, vicious blood qi was genuinely meant to be honed through slaughter, or by absorbing items that nurtured vicious blood qi in large quantities, which he lacked. However, the requirement for the Vicious Blood Art was not actually nurturing an infinite amount of vicious blood qi; reaching a certain threshold was sufficient.

As he had said to Cult Leader Xue before, it was harmful to be overly obsessed with killing, and reaching higher cultivation realms was not just about accumulating vicious blood qi. One's understanding and application of it was what mattered most.

Was Lie's vicious blood qi very intense in that slash?

Actually, it wasn't. It was quite calm and composed. It was as if what he was doing was just a trivial task. He was even distractedly carving the array plate when he slashed out.

He did not reveal or display some overwhelming vicious blood qi.

But in the end, he still managed to create a hellish impression with unparalleled ferocity and terror. Why is that?

It's because of the environment.

Yes, vicious blood qi is not only internal but also universally present externally. The enemy has it, the dead have it, and the bloodier the battlefield, the more of it there is.

It can be drawn upon.

At this moment, his insights suddenly aligned with the previous guidance he received from Huangfu Qing and Yuxu, his insights all converged into a single, unified understanding.

The first layer of the Profound Mysteries involved integrating with the external environment and merging with heaven and earth.

But at the moment, there was no vicious blood qi for him to use to test out his ideas. He was thus missing a catalyst to help him break through.

Should I challenge Cult Leader Xue to a fight again?

Zhao Changhe pondered for a moment and suddenly embedded the blood token into the center of the array plate.

In an instant, the array plate overflowed with vicious blood qi, as if it contained infinite power ready to erupt at any moment.

I got it.

Swish!

Zhao Changhe swung his saber.

His slash did not have an immediate effect, and the blood pool did not splash around like before, but the protectors by the door suddenly felt a suffocating pressure. Their blood and qi surged uncontrollably, their hearts contracted tightly, and an overwhelming sense of terror arose within them.

It felt to them as if the one who had swung the saber just now was not Zhao Changhe.

No... it was the Blood God reborn.

The thud of knees hitting the ground could be heard coming from the door as they all knelt down and prostrated themselves, their foreheads touching the ground as they prayed devoutly, "We welcome our god... May the Blood God guide our way forward..."

Zhao Changhe turned his head, and the blood-red color in his eyes flashed and faded away.

He had wandered and looked for so long... Through the vast desert, to Beimang, to Kunlun, and now into Wushan. From north to south, from winter to spring.

Enlightened by Hongling, instructed by Huangfu, sought advice from Yuxu, and guided by the gods and demons.

Finally, he achieved the first layer of the Profound Mysteries.

It had been a year and three months since he began practicing martial arts.

Chapter 362: How I Plan to Enter the Ranking of Man

At this moment, Zhao Changhe truly embodied the Blood God.

With the activation of the Blood God's array plate, the entire space reacted with extremely violent energy. The air was thick with blood and qi, majestic and awe-inspiring.

In the absence of Cult Leader Xue, no elder or protector of the sixth or seventh layer of the Profound Gate could withstand the pervasive vicious blood qi, all of which was being harnessed by Zhao Changhe. The spiritual shock was such that they felt as though they were facing their true master.

At the same time, they were seeing the master of vicious blood qi.

The vicious blood qi was rampant but did not invade him, embodying the later stages of the Blood God Cult's pursuit of becoming the master of vicious blood qi.

Anyone practicing the Vicious Blood Art was bound to suffer immensely from its backlash, Zhao Changhe included. He had not faced this backlash for a while thanks to the calming methods that he got from Tang Wanzhuang, which helped suppress it, but this did not mean that it was impossible for the vicious blood qi within him to run rampant. The danger was always lurking.

If he ever fell into a state where the methods he got from Tang Wanzhuang were no longer effective, such as suffering severe internal injuries that left his spirit unguarded, the vicious blood qi would surge uncontrollably, forcing him to endure all the accumulated backlash.

However, at this moment, it seemed as though he had become the master of the world's vicious blood qi, obtaining complete control over it.

This was just a future goal, in fact; for now, Zhao Changhe had barely scratched the surface. Yet, to the onlookers, it seemed as if he had already achieved it.

Zhao Changhe's body was exceptionally suited to this environment. He felt as though his power had doubled, and his muscles bulged so much that they looked like they were going to burst.

This was as it should be. He, after all, had the Blood Asura Body and practiced the Vicious Blood Art. As Lie had done, he had forged his own Asura Body.

Lie was born a slave, lacking any significant inheritance when it came to internal arts. He had taught himself the Vicious Blood Art on the battlefield, relying entirely on his own blood and qi for his external cultivation.

The essence of external arts was a bodily transformation, with the layers of the Profound Stage corresponding to the evolution of one's muscles and blood layer by layer. When one unlocked the Profound Mysteries, their foundation should have already been established, and their body was supposed to begin evolving toward a special Dao Body. In the ancient era, rare and precious resources were abundant, allowing Lie to easily forge a body suited for himself. Unfortunately, the world was no longer as bountiful as it once was.

Furthermore, because the array plate was incomplete, the Blood God Cult did not even have the concept of the Blood Asura Body. People always said that the Blood God Cult's inheritance was incomplete, and this was actually the most crucial missing part. Conversely, Zhao Changhe, guided by the Heavenly Tome, had been sprinting toward the most suitable physique for himself from the beginning. His breakthrough into the Profound Mysteries was easier than Xue Canghai's, mainly for this reason.

In other words, although Cult Leader Xue had reached the Profound Mysteries, his physique had yet to reach the required level. Zhao Changhe, on the other hand, had laid himself a complete foundation while going through the Profound Gates, internally and externally, thus allowing him to achieve the first layer of the Profound Mysteries comprehensively.

To others, it seemed as if he was not just the saint of the cult but the very reincarnation of the Blood God. His feats were simply that incredible.

The sound of footsteps could be heard approaching from outside. Xue Canghai, sensing the change in the sacred artifact, hurried back. Seeing the scene inside, he was overjoyed, "It really is the Blood God Command Token! It truly activates the sacred artifact! This destructive power! It can shatter the world and turn it into a sea of blood! We're going to be invincible! Hahaha! Ah..."

Zhao Changhe looked at Xue Canghai as if he were a fool.

The fuck kind of anime did this villain come from?

Xue Canghai noticed Zhao Changhe's blank stare and felt awkward. He then saw that all his protectors were still prostrating to Zhao Changhe with their foreheads on the ground, completely ignoring his arrival, and he felt even more embarrassed.

He coughed twice and cautiously asked, "What is it?"

Zhao Changhe said impassively, "As you can see, this is the key to activating the sacred artifact... It should not be called the Blood God Command Token[1] because the Blood God had no followers. He was a lone wanderer. His token did not command anyone, so it should not be called a command token. It's more of a personal keepsake."

Xue Canghai said, "The name does not matter. What's important is whether it truly activates the sacred artifact. I know the artifact is still missing some parts, but can it at least allow us to access the core inheritance?"

Zhao Changhe replied, "Maybe it can, but you might need to stay here for a few years to comprehend it. I'm just not sure if you'll actually be able to comprehend anything, even given time."

Xue Canghai said excitedly, "With my understanding of the Blood God's methods, I absolutely can!"

Zhao Changhe remained expressionless. "Oh. Then go ahead and try to comprehend it for a few years."

Xue Canghai, sensing Zhao Changhe's demeanor, asked hesitantly, "Are you hinting at something?"

Zhao Changhe, with his hands in his sleeves, said, "I already have the ready-made version. Do you want it?"

Xue Canghai almost spat out blood.

His previously towering and proud figure unconsciously stooped lower, and he asked with a careful smile, "Uh... Your esteemed self is already the cult's saint..."

Zhao Changhe continued to keep his hands in his sleeves, "Didn't you say that I could choose not to acknowledge it?"

Xue Canghai wiped his sweat. "Well, since you've already come to comprehend the sacred artifact, we're opening the door wide for you. This incense..."

Zhao Changhe sighed. "Cult Leader Xue, I don't want to make things difficult for you."

Xue Canghai straightened his back slightly. "Then what is it that you want?"

"First, I can tell you what I don't want. I don't want to pass on the inheritance to an evil, bloodthirsty cult. Even if you accuse me of disregarding our ties and showing no respect, I cannot personally create a group of demons to wreak havoc on the world."

"This world and all its insignificant beings, what do they matter to you or me?" Xue Canghai asked incredulously. "Why do you care so much?"

Zhao Changhe was silent for a moment, then sighed. "Because I am human."

Xue Canghai: "...You are the Blood God's representative."

"But he was human too," Zhao Changhe said. "Perhaps he was indeed ruthless and bloodthirsty, and he did realize his top-tier cultivation through a path of slaughter, through which he mastered the use of vicious blood qi. However, he never did what he did to fulfill some lowly desire for murder, nor was it to deliberately cultivate through slaughter. Chasing the past backward is unwise; you should instead focus on keeping up with the times and advancing."

Xue Canghai was stunned for a moment.

So, our cultivation method wasn't wrong. It's just that we were chasing after a past that the Blood God himself abandoned?

"If you truly regard me as the saint... Well, perhaps I truly am. At least, in the sense that I understand the Blood God," said Zhao Changhe. "If you are willing to let me interpret the Blood God's will and you're willing to follow that interpretation, then I can give you his teachings."

Xue Canghai was silent for a moment, but then he shrugged. "The saint's role is precisely that."

“Can I make changes to the dogma of the cult?”

“Yes.”

“Even if it diverges greatly from the path it's currently on?”

“As long as it's true to the Blood God, then it is acceptable,” Xue Canghai said slowly. “We venerate the Blood God himself, not the interpretation of the first cult leader. But Young Hero Zhao...”

Zhao Changhe responded with a “Hmm?”

He noticed how Xue Canghai did not call him saint this time but Young Hero Zhao, but he did not say anything.

Xue Canghai continued, “I believe that you understand the Blood God's will. But how can you make us believe that what you convey to us is true and not altered by your own interpretation?”

“That's simple. Haven't you already confirmed it yourself?”

Xue Canghai was puzzled. “What do you mean by that?”

“Your previous breakthrough, wasn't it because you embraced the spirit of resisting adversity?”

“Yes.”

“Why is the first move of the Vicious Blood Saber Art called Scattering the Gods and Buddhas? And why can this move be used from the beginning to the end, throughout the entire cultivation journey? Was he trying to kill himself? No, it was the roar of a rebel, from the lowest slave to becoming a demonic god. He fought his entire life, and his blade was always aimed at the strong, whether they be god or Buddha. In the beginning, he merely wanted nobody to mess with him, but in the end, he decided to be the one to go after others!”

Xue Canghai was dumbfounded. What are you talking about? The Blood God was a slave?

“Is being a slave so disgraceful?” Zhao Changhe gave him a sidelong glance. “Aren't you in a similar position under Vermillion Bird?”

Xue Canghai's face flushed red.

“I've already verified this. It's up to you whether to believe me or not.” Zhao Changhe ignored Xue Canghai and turned to the array plate, bowing deeply. “At the very least, you best remember his name.”

Xue Canghai said seriously, “Please enlighten me, saint.”

“His name was Lie. I don't know if it's because slaves had no surname or if it's an ancient custom.”

Zhao Changhe lightly engraved the character Lie on the blood token. He then spoke softly so that only he could hear himself, “I've learned many techniques from different masters—the Sword Emperor's sword arts, the Tang Clan's techniques, the Azure Dragon's Rejuvenation Art, and the Thief Saint's Crane Controlling Art—but I've never considered myself their successor or inheritor. However, I acknowledge that you, the Blood God, have truly passed on your legacy to me... I will remember your will.”

Even as he spoke to himself, there was still something he did not say.

To him, if he truly were to scatter the gods and Buddhas, the first figure he would have to confront would be the blind woman.

This defiance toward the blind woman had always been hidden in his heart, and even though he felt more familiar and had grown closer to the blind woman, it had never changed.

No one... has the right to use me as a pawn. Not you, not anyone else.

He did not look back. Instead, he focused on the token and said softly, “Send the Maitreya envoy back, and don't let him know I'm here.”

Xue Canghai instinctively bowed. “Yes.”

At that moment, Xue Canghai experienced a strange feeling.

Zhao Changhe had an unusual aura. When he issued the order, he truly resembled a true leader. Combined with the Blood God's will, he exerted a strong suppression over the Blood God's followers. Even Xue Canghai felt it subconsciously, and he realized why the protectors remained kneeling, seemingly enthralled.

Yet Zhao Changhe has never been a leader. Wait, does having been a stronghold master count? Is this just his innate quality?

Xue Canghai suddenly recalled a certain rumor.

Could he really be a prince?

Zhao Changhe said, "I will stay here for a while, both to preach and to consolidate myself. What do you think, cult leader?"

Xue Canghai replied, "This is the saint's home. You can stay as long as you like. But what do you mean by a while?"

Zhao Changhe turned his head and smiled brightly. "Of course, there will come a day when I must leave."

Xue Canghai was puzzled. "When is that?"

"On the day that you and Maitreya agreed to deploy troops," Zhao Changhe said softly. "When I killed Fa Sheng and went north, I was actually fleeing Jiangnan. I was unable to stay within the Maitreya Cult's domain, and I could not even help my friend defend Gusu... While others see my journey as a heroic tale, this has always been a regret of mine."

Xue Canghai could not make sense of the shift in conversation. Why is he bringing this up now?

Zhao Changhe did not take long to clarify. "I seized the title of First Hidden Dragon by defeating enemies in Saibei. I shall secure my place on the Ranking of Man by bringing peace to Jiangnan."

Chapter 363: Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night

Night had fallen.

Xue Canghai went to deal with the Maitreya envoy, while Zhao Changhe chose not to stay in the Blood God Cult's secret chamber. Instead, he stayed in a large courtyard within the mountain stronghold, gazing at the moon.

He found himself unable to sleep.

With his current level of cultivation, he hardly needed sleep anymore. Meditation could completely replace his need for sleep, and it even provided him with better results.

As he gazed at the moon, his mind was restless, his thoughts chaotic.

His mind drifted to Yue Hongling, and he began to understand why Yue Hongling and Chi Li were reluctant to be placed at the bottom of the Ranking Man. At the moment, he felt the same way—he was already guaranteed a ranking on the Ranking of Man, so why settle for one at the bottom?

The only question now was how high he could aim for. A low rank was meaningless, yet if he aimed too high, he might just fall short.

As he thought about this, he chuckled to himself.

What am I thinking? Is this even worth fretting over?

In the end, I'm just an ordinary person. I still crave the vanity of being on the ranking.

Once, those on the Ranking of Man seemed so far above... Well, at least those who unlocked the Profound Mysteries. Those who didn't were never really impressive.

But now that I've reached this level, it doesn't really seem all that remarkable. This is just the beginning. The more I've seen, the more I've come to understand how much further there is to go.

Hah, even just figuring out the next steps for the second layer of the Profound Mysteries is daunting.

Cui Wenjing had once told him that the ninth layer of the Profound Gate was the peak of human martial arts in this world. He said that everything beyond the Profound Gate was about cultivating other things, building upon one's accumulation.

The Profound Mysteries no longer had clear indicators for each layer as the Profound Gate did. Now, having reached the first Profound Mystery, how much accumulation did he need to reach the threshold of the second? There were no clear guidelines. As a result, it made it seem as if there was an endless path ahead of him.

The Blood Asura Body was relatively straightforward. It would likely require finding certain suitable natural treasures of heaven and earth to further enhance and transform it. This would be difficult for others, but Zhao Changhe had the Heavenly Tome, so it was comparatively easier for him.

The internal cultivation aspect was even more confusing than the external cultivation aspect. After converting acquired into innate, which acupoint breakthrough counted as a layer? How many meridians needed to be cleared to count as having unlocked a layer? Or was it a matter of reaching a certain level of accumulation?

Supposedly, all these were relevant, with different schools having different criteria, making it impossible to quantify.

Xia Longyuan had never personally guided him on how to cultivate the Six Harmonies Art, leaving him to figure it out on his own. Did this mean he could follow any path, like the Four Idols Cult's method of connecting all acupoints under the starry sky?

But then he thought... perhaps it did not matter. This unquantifiable state actually brought martial arts back to their roots, where there were no concrete levels, and it was all just about seeing who had deeper accumulation, better techniques, and a more seamless integration with nature.

Thinking this way, Zhao Changhe felt a bit more at ease. Without a clear threshold, he decided to pursue all paths to the best of his abilities. He would clear all of his meridians, break through all of his acupoints, and accumulate true qi to his utmost limit. As long as he kept advancing, he would eventually touch the threshold of the second layer. By then, he could look for many experts to guide him through key points, offering him treatment no less than that given to the direct disciples and scions of prestigious forces.

Zhao Changhe took a long breath and drew Dragon Bird, and he began practicing under the moonlight.

The gentle spring rain could not deter his desire as a martial artist to train and improve himself.

Apart from the days when he was entangled by emotional and romantic affairs, he practiced the saber every day, even while traveling.

Now that he had reached the first layer of the Profound Mysteries, he needed to practice to consolidate and refine his skills even more.

Swish!

His saber cut through the air with a sharp swish.

In the darkness, his vicious qi lay hidden, echoing with ghostly cries and howls.

Nearby, the members of the cult in the mountain stronghold simultaneously turned their heads toward his residence, and Instructor Sun sighed softly.

It seemed that he was the one who had to kneel to Zhao Changhe now. Yet despite the change in status, Zhao Changhe remained as diligent as he did in the past.

Meanwhile, Cult Leader Xue had just returned from the secret chamber after negotiating countless details with the Maitreya envoy, who left satisfied with his perceived success. Seeing the saber light flashing from the mountaintop, he stood there in a daze.

Everyone thought Zhao Changhe's progress was fast, and though that was indeed the case, he also put in tremendous effort. He had managed to become who he was due to a combination of talent and diligence. Xue Canghai himself trained intermittently, only becoming more diligent this past year for obvious reasons.

Unfortunately, he could not exact his revenge anymore. Yue Hongling was Zhao Changhe's wife, or at least his lover, and he might even have to salute her the next time they met.

Damn it.

The Blood God Cult's rules did not prohibit marriage. In theory, vigorous men should have the highest needs. Fang Buping had enjoyed his own maidservants in Beimang, but truly dedicated individuals such as Cult Leader Xue and Instructor Sun abstained from women.

This was not like how the experts on the Ranking of Heaven abstained from emotions. Instead, it was largely because the Blood God Cult's practice relied on the cultivation of blood and qi, thus it felt detrimental to so casually deplete it. Maintaining their vital yang was beneficial. Xue Canghai believed that Zhao Changhe's cultivation would have been even purer if he had remained celibate. This was not a matter of understanding the Blood God's teachings but a principle in martial arts.

Xue Canghai was slightly worried that Zhao Changhe might disrupt the sanctity of the cult with no one to control him. Then he realized that it was not the Blood God Cult's problem. They did not have any female followers or members. It was the Four Idols Cult that truly needed to be concerned.

Thinking of this, Xue Canghai suddenly felt happy again and hummed a tune as he returned to his residence.

A confidant whispered, "Cult Leader, do we truly recognize him as the saint?"

"Why not? If he isn't the saint, then he might as well be the reincarnation of the Blood God."

The confidant sighed, "But if he changes our doctrines, we will face significant constraints."

"Are we not already constrained? When the Four Idols Cult visits, you have to kneel. At the very least, he won't make you kneel."

"..."

Xue Canghai said calmly, "All that matters is true power. If his interpretation of the Blood God's will is true and can truly help us pursue the Blood God's power, then that is what's most important. There is no point in following teachings that let us do as we please without the power to back it up. That is mere self-deception."

The confidant asked, “What if he interferes with the power structure rather than just the teachings? Given the fervor people have toward him, I imagine it would not be difficult for him to take over.”

Xue Canghai laughed. “Do you think Zhao Changhe, famous throughout the land, the First Hidden Dragon, someone who broke through to the Profound Mysteries in just a year, would cover the little power within the Blood God Cult? Do you think someone like him has the same petty ambitions as you?”

The confidant broke into a cold sweat, realizing that he had never seen this side of the cult leader before. If you asked around, everyone would say that Xue Canghai was a cunning and ruthless leader, and nobody really thought him to be someone with a broad perspective.

Xue Canghai calmly said, “Since you were speaking for my benefit, I won’t punish you this time. But your narrow view disappoints me. Reflect on this for three days.”

The confidant bowed his head in submission. “Yes.”

Xue Canghai glanced once more at the flashes of saber light and the vicious blood qi emanating from Zhao Changhe’s courtyard. He suddenly felt an itch to fight.

Now that he’s reached the Profound Mysteries, how about we have another match tomorrow?

As he thought this, the saber light stopped, and Zhao Changhe excitedly flew over. “Cult Leader Xue, Cult Leader Xue!”

Xue Canghai was taken aback, “What is it, Saint?”

“Let’s have a match!”

Xue Canghai looked up at the pitch-black night sky, his head breaking into a cold sweat.

I thought I was a martial arts fanatic with how I was planning to challenge you tomorrow. But you want to fight right now in the middle of the night? Well, screw it. Might as well.

“Alright.” He drew his Blood God Saber and smiled. “Saint, your saber art is not refined enough. Now that I’ve broken through to the Profound Mysteries, I have more techniques at my disposal. You might lose badly this time.”

“It’s not like we’re having a fight to the death. We’re just sparring. Come on, show me what you can do now that you’ve broken through.”

The clash of their sabers startled countless cult members, who rushed over to watch.

Who had won previously? Zhao Changhe seemed to have been at a disadvantage, but then he turned the tide, putting Xue Canghai on the defensive. Xue Canghai then used that momentum to break through, ending the fight. If they had continued, Zhao Changhe might have lost after the breakthrough, but before that, it was a draw.

What about this time?

Clang!

Their sabers clashed once more.

The nearby cult members suddenly felt their blood boiling, and they felt as if their veins were about to burst, leaving them in shock.

The difference was too stark! When they were spectating the previous duel, it had not felt like this at all.

They were experiencing such effects despite only spectating. Their minds could not help but wonder and think about what would happen if they faced such a saber head-on? Would they not be dead for certain?

The two combatants seemed to be unaffected by each other’s aura. Xue Canghai swept his saber horizontally, while Zhao Changhe countered with a downward slash.

Both had smiles on their faces.

With a mind as calm as water, Zhao Changhe could see that with each frontal slash, Xue Canghai's saber somehow emitted extremely fine strands of saber qi behind and beside him, encircling him.

“Bloodied Mountains and Rivers.”

If unnoticed, one might think that the attack was only from the front, and they would end up getting dismembered by the hidden saber qi.

“I knew you would use this technique.”

Swish!

With a swift movement, endless blood-red light scattered in all directions, dissipating the ambush of the saber qi. At the same time, Xue Canghai realized that he had misjudged the path of Zhao Changhe's saber, which he had clearly grasped earlier in the day.

Dragon Bird was moving faster than he expected, exceeding his predictions by a fraction.

Clang!

Xue Canghai hastily blocked the attack, but with such a hasty block, he failed to hold his ground and was forced to retreat.

Zhao Changhe pressed on relentlessly with another swift strike.

The strange thing was that his saber was genuinely moving faster than expected. It was not some kind of visual deception, it was truly just faster.

Xue Canghai's misjudgment caused him to lose the upper hand, and he struggled to parry the relentless assault. He could not fathom what was happening and could only wonder if Zhao Changhe had suddenly gained some extraordinary boost.

Clang!

Dragon Bird broke through Xue Canghai's defense and pressed against his throat.

Xue Canghai stood still, bewildered.

Zhao Changhe suddenly looked up at the sky. "Hey... The Tome of Troubled Times better not announce this."

All of the cult members were stunned.

The two were quite evenly matched earlier in the day, yet now Xue Canghai was defeated in just a few moves?

Xue Canghai, perplexed, asked, "Why is your saber so fast? It shouldn't be."

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and laughed, "Before seeking a breakthrough in vicious blood qi, I comprehended many other techniques. Does this strike seem like it slips along the night wind?"

Xue Canghai was taken aback. "Not only can you harness the surrounding blood qi, but you can do the same with the wind and rain?"

Zhao Changhe laughed. "Should I give this move a name?"

"...What will you call it?"

"Listening to the Spring Rain in a Little Pavilion at Night." [1]

Chapter 364: The Final Consolidation

Xue Canghai had no clue about Zhao Changhe's love for Gu Long's works. To him, naming a move with such poetic softness seemed utterly pointless, especially for a man cultivating such fierce blood and qi.

Is he trying to impress some young lady? Oh, right... The campaign in Jiangnan seems to be under Tang Wanzhuang's leadership now...

Xue Canghai's expression turned extremely strange.

Zhao Changhe gazed at the sky. After waiting for a while and seeing that the Tome of Troubled Times did not flash in the sky, he breathed a sigh of relief and cheerfully said, "Let's call it a day. Everyone, go back and rest. From now on, I'll be sparring with Cult Leader Xue every day."

Xue Canghai's heart stopped.

The cult members suddenly felt that their cult leader's life had suddenly gotten a lot more miserable. At least when he was merely a gatekeeper in the Ranking of Man, while many wanted to challenge him, none of them ever succeeded. But now, he was going to be beaten every day like a practice dummy.

Come to think of it, the cult leader broke through to the Profound Mysteries first and he's been comprehending Profound Mysteries-level techniques for many years. On the other hand, Zhao Changhe just broke through and he had barely been exposed to any advanced techniques before. Comparing the two of them, the cult leader should be at a higher level. Does this mean that the cult leader was surpassed by someone below him again?

The cult members quickly dispersed to avoid showing their sympathetic faces to the cult leader.

Fortunately, the Tome of Troubled Times didn't make an appearance. Otherwise, the cult leader would really have been too pitiful...

Xue Canghai, unaware of what the cult members were thinking, was instead contemplating Zhao Changhe's strike. He finally realized, "I thought that you created a new move, but upon reflection, it's still based on the framework of Hell on Earth. It's just that it incorporates other elements. I noticed that it includes the essence of the Yellow Sand Saber Art that you taught the Beimang cult members."

"Yes, my vicious blood qi isn't strong enough, so I have to incorporate other techniques. You, on the other hand, don't need to follow my path and you can simply focus on refining your vicious blood qi."

"If you continue like this, you could truly create your own saber art."

Zhao Changhe considered it. “It’s not just about creating my own saber art; ideally, I should create my own cultivation technique. Someone once advised me not to get too obsessed with inheritances from the ancient times. You should heed that advice as well.”

That’s easy to say, but how difficult is it to create your own cultivation technique? Do you think everyone is Xia Longyuan?

Xue Canghai did not say that and instead said, “If you feel your vicious blood is insufficient, you could use the array plate to cultivate it. Especially now that the sacred artifact is activated, it’s full of energy. As long as you can keep your mind steady, cultivating vicious blood qi through it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I had the same thought. I’ll give it a try later.” Zhao Changhe then asked, “Cult Leader Xue, in your last move, and the one from our previous fight, your saber strikes were light yet powerful, and the force they carried was both contained and solid. How are you able to achieve such concentrated power without it dissipating?”

“Oh, about that... There’s a trick to it when channeling your energy...”

The two of them walked into the secret chamber, chatting like old friends and exchanging insights. In the distance, Instructor Sun scratched his head, feeling somewhat abandoned.

When did these two get so close? It’s really strange.

As the two arrived at the array plate, Zhao Changhe took out the blood bead and tried fitting it into various similarly shaped slots. Finally, with a click, it fit perfectly into one of the slots.

Although he had absorbed some of the vicious blood qi contained within the bead, the amount he had taken when he was at the Profound Gate was like scooping a cup of water from the ocean—it made no significant impact on the sacred artifact.

Beside him, Xue Canghai was overjoyed. “We’ve been searching for the components of the array plate for generations with little success. We found some components early on, but none recently. Where did you get this?”

“I got it from Maitreya,” Zhao Changhe replied. “Maybe they have more? Doesn’t their philosophy of killing to achieve enlightenment seem similar?”

Xue Canghai laughed. “No need to say anything else, I understand.”

“Ahem.” Zhao Changhe continued, “Anyway, from now on, the main goal of the cult will be to look for these components. This isn’t a task I can handle alone.”

This was one of the key benefits of reconciling with and becoming a part of the Blood God Cult.

Zhao Changhe himself had a keen interest in the complete array plate. The power of a fully restored sacred artifact was unquestionable. Even in the previous era, this array plate would have been among the top-tier artifacts. If they could fully assemble it in the current era, then they might really just become an unstoppable force. Even the likes of the blind woman might not withstand a single attack from it.

However, Zhao Changhe did not have the time to search for all of the scattered pieces of the array plate on his own. Having a cult dedicated to this task made it much more manageable. Once the pieces were gathered, he would still hold significant influence over how it was to be used.

As for the cult’s previous difficulty in finding the components, that was closely related to their limited power and connections. It was only normal for the Blood God Cult to have been unable to find any treasures with how it had been hiding and not daring to roam around. But now that Zhao Changhe was part of the cult, he significantly improved their capabilities and broadened their network. Most importantly, he had Ying Five as a collaborator.

Xue Canghai did not know about Ying Five, but he understood that with Zhao Changhe, the Blood God Cult’s circumstances were likely to change.

He sincerely bowed. “Thank you very much, Saint.”

Zhao Changhe said, “It’s late. You should get some rest. I’ll try absorbing some vicious blood qi for my cultivation.”

Catching the hint to leave, Xue Canghai instead warned him, “Absorbing external vicious blood qi can be troublesome as it will often come with various negative impurities that can affect the mind and gradually change one’s temperament. I assume you’re aware of this?”

“Yes, I’ve absorbed energy from the bead before.”

“You might have used other methods to calm your mind and suppress the impurities in the past, but that only works against weaker energies. Absorbing energy from a sacred artifact is a different thing altogether due to its far higher level. Our cult actually has a specialized technique to directly eliminate the negative impurities and specifically extract the vicious blood qi. Our specialized technique should help you get much better results. You can also use the technique on other items containing vicious blood qi in the future.”

Whoa, these guys really are professionals.

Zhao Changhe was pleasantly surprised and said, “Please teach me then.”

Xue Canghai imparted the technique and then took his leave. Zhao Changhe lightly touched the array plate, closed his eyes, and began to sense and extract the vicious blood qi from within.

Meanwhile, the Heavenly Tome opened up a VR-like display. “Blood God Array Plate, created by the Blood God in his final moments, a slaughter array made from the blood of tens of thousands. It contains the Blood God’s own blood and flesh, and also the culmination of his lifelong practice of martial arts. Analysis: ...”

“Wait, don’t analyze the Blood God’s martial arts right now. Analyze the energy inside first.”

The Heavenly Tome seemed to glitch, as if this request fell outside its scope. After a while, it replied: “Due to containing the Blood God’s own blood, extracting a portion can serve as nourishment for the advancement of the Blood Asura Body. However, due to the significant difference in bloodline power, in order to avoid bloodline replacement or implosion, dilution is required.”

Zhao Changhe was intrigued, “How do I extract and dilute it?”

The Heavenly Tome fell silent.

Its purpose was to analyze martial arts, not to be a guide for everything. Hinting about the requirement for dilution to Zhao Changhe was already a significant deviation from its primary function. It could not possibly just list all the methods for him.

Zhao Changhe did not mind. He had been contemplating his next step in cultivation, and here it was, right in front of him.

As for the exact method, he would figure it out eventually.

He stopped interacting with the Heavenly Tome and quietly used the technique that Xue Canghai taught him, directly eliminating impurities and extracting the vicious blood qi.

His vicious blood qi was indeed lacking. Because of that, even if Xue Canghai mocked him for it, there was nothing he could really do. He had only been in the jianghu for such a short time. How many people could he have killed, particularly compared to the members of a demonic cult? Fortunately, his deep incursions into the battlefield had somewhat increased his kill count, providing him with some vicious blood qi. Had he remained in the Central Plains, he might never have accumulated enough vicious blood qi to break through to the Profound Mysteries.

This step filled the last piece of the puzzle and further solidified the foundation of the Blood Asura Body. Without sufficient vicious blood qi, there was no point refining the Blood Asura Body.

*

The next morning, Zhao Changhe arrived at the training grounds, looking invigorated. Instructor Sun and an elder were guiding the cult members in their practice. Upon seeing Zhao Changhe, they all greeted him, "Saint."

They were secretly astonished. The previous day, Zhao Changhe had an air of scholarly elegance, hardly fitting his moniker as the Bloodthirsty Asura. But after just one night, he seemed to have regained the ferocity that matched his nickname.

If he and Cult Leader Xue were to fight today, the cult leader would probably be defeated even faster. Is this guy a monster? His rate of improvement is simply too ridiculous.

As they thought this, Zhao Changhe waved cheerfully and said, "Good morning, everyone. Good morning, Instructor Sun."

His smile instantly dispelled half of the ferocity in his aura. Everyone sighed in relief, and the elder greeted him, “Good morning, Saint. Would you like to show us a few moves? Everyone is eager to learn.”

Zhao Changhe replied, “Uh, I came to have a spar with Old Xue.”

Instructor Sun remained silent for a moment, then he slowly said, “Cult Leader Xue left early this morning, saying only an idiot would continue being a training dummy.”

Zhao Changhe’s gaze shifted past Instructor Sun and landed on the nearby elder, who took a step back and looked at him warily.

Zhao Changhe grinned. “Elder, you just mentioned that I should show everyone a few moves...”

The elder laughed wryly, “We can’t provide the kind of challenge you need...”

“Sure you can,” Zhao Changhe said earnestly. “Sparring with the cult leader is for honing myself in one-on-one combat. Here, I can practice against group combat... How many of you are here? Come at me all at once.”

Everyone: “...”

What did Cult Leader Xue say earlier? Only an idiot would continue being a training dummy.

Instructor Sun sighed.

The elder patted his shoulder. “Now I believe it. You definitely aren’t some reclusive old man selling wontons... This bastard got where he is today entirely because he’s a madman.”

Chapter 365: Zhao Wangtang

When the Maitreya envoy came again to schedule the time and route for the expedition, Zhao Changhe had already been staying at the mountain stronghold for over half a month.

From the initial fervent worship of him as the saint of the cult, the members of the cult gradually came to avoid him as if he were the plague.

Even Cult Leader Xue had been avoiding him for seven or eight days, and eventually, whenever Zhao Changhe appeared, everyone scattered in all directions, disappearing without a trace.

Everyone in the Blood God Cult who could fight had been thoroughly beaten up by him, whether it be in single combat or in group combat, whether it be normal brawls or complex tactics, barehanded or with weapons.

He had fought everyone and thoroughly practiced everything he needed to.

“Instructor Sun, Instructor Sun...”

“Get lost, I don’t know you.”

For the first time since his early days in Beimang, Zhao Changhe once again experienced a period of extensive practice and reached a point where he was invincible in the mountain stronghold. The difference was that back then, Instructor Sun had watched with hopeful and appreciative eyes as a promising disciple fought his way from a mere novice to the respected Boss Zhao. This time, however, even Instructor Sun would run away at the sight of him from a distance.

“Hey, I’m here to say goodbye, Old Sun! Why are you running?”

Instructor Sun finally stopped and turned to look at his swiftly approaching disciple, who arrived in an instant.

His movement art truly is impressive... It has far surpassed the Blood God Cult’s Traceless Soaring Blood, and it’s unrecognizable from the Water-Treading Art he used before.

As Zhao Changhe came up to him, he discreetly handed Instructor Sun a booklet and a lump of “jelly.”

“What is this?”

“The booklet contains my insights on the Vicious Blood Art and saber arts from the past few days. Please correct me.”

Instructor Sun was not sure how to feel about this. It seemed that Zhao Changhe actually just wanted to teach him without saying it outright, which was why he asked for his “corrections.” Instructor Sun remained expressionless and said, “Fine, I guess I’ll take a look at it for you.”

“Okay.”

“And what’s this lump of jelly? Cult Leader Xue’s guts?”

Zhao Changhe was speechless for a moment. “...This is a special energy crystal that can be used to transform the body. It also has some benefits for the meridians.”

Instructor Sun’s expression changed slightly.

Zhao Changhe lowered his voice. “Don’t let others see it. Just use it quietly yourself.”

“I’m not stupid.” Instructor Sun hesitated but finally asked, “Are you really leaving?”

“Yes, Maitreya is on the move, and so it’s time for me to move as well,” Zhao Changhe replied with a smile. “I really didn’t expect that both times I’d find the most comfortable places for accumulation and reflection would be in the mountain strongholds of the Blood God Cult.”

Instructor Sun said, “The life of a bandit suits you quite well. Have you considered changing the way you speak? You talk too politely now, and it’s made the entire mountain stronghold three times more civilized. It pisses me off.”

“Unfortunately, that isn’t possible. I’m about to meet someone, and if I speak crudely with them, I’ll get myself beaten up. Besides... the rebellious nature of a bandit should lie in their actions, not their words.”

“To be honest, I haven’t seen you act much like a bandit either,” Instructor Sun remarked, feeling a pang of regret for not having the cultural knowledge to quote something interesting like “if life were but a first meeting.”

Zhao Changhe did not continue the conversation. He cupped his fist and bowed deeply. “Take care, Instructor. Until we meet again.”

As he spoke, he gracefully retreated, leaping several zhang back before elegantly turning in mid-air. His toes touched the edge of the fence as he soared away.

Instructor Sun stood with his mouth agape, thinking to himself that just Zhao Changhe’s display of movement arts might be enough to charm any onlookers. He wondered which family’s daughter was going to be in trouble this time.

That kid has really grown up...

He squeezed the jelly-like substance in his hand, his mood suddenly improving. He hummed a little tune as he swaggered back to his room.

*

Zhao Changhe descended the mountain, retrieved Snow-Treading Crow from the stable at the lowest fortress of the mountain stronghold, and then headed straight for Xiangyang.

He did not ride Snow-Treading Crow but rather took it with him on a boat.

I depart from the walled city of Baidi under the multicolored clouds of dawn, sailing downstream to Jiangling a thousand li away.[1]

Floating down this river, this is the perfect setting to quote a famous verse—when else am I supposed to show off?

There were still some days before the agreed-upon date for Maitreya and Cult Leader Xue to launch the attack on Xiangyang. Zhao Changhe was well aware of how they planned to attack and the number of troops.

Calculating the time, he figured he should have enough time to visit Gusu and inform Tang Wanzhuang before the attack began. But before that, he needed to scout Xiangyang. It would be embarrassing to know the enemy’s plans but not the situation of the place he was supposed to defend. Tang Wanzhuang would never let him live that down.

Technically, Xiangyang was still part of the Great Xia, but in reality, things were not quite so.

A long time ago, someone had warned him that many places had begun to act on their own ambitions, and as a suspected prince, his arrival in such places could be dangerous. Whether Xiangyang was one of those places was unclear. Having been away from the political landscape for so long, he had almost lost track of the world's current power dynamics.

Once he understood the situation in Xiangyang, he could inform Tang Wanzhuang and leave her to deal with the attack. He did not understand the intricacies of strategy and tactics—his expertise lay only in fighting.

However, that was not the case for Tang Wanzhuang.

Even Tang Buqi had studied military strategies from a young age, and Tang Wanzhuang even more so. And beyond them, Huangfu Qing, as the daughter of a general, had studied warfare even more. She was a general's daughter, meant to wear armor and ride a horse, akin to Mu Guiying or Fan Lihua.[2]

Previously, Tang Wanzhuang had stayed in Jinling to confront Maitreya, but both of them eventually realized that personal standoffs on a battlefield of thousands were utterly foolish, so they tacitly retreated to their respective bases. At that time, Tang Wanzhuang did not have any command over the military. Her personal presence only served to provide some deterrence. Besides that, she could not do much, so she ultimately had no choice but to return to the capital.

This time, heading south once more to oversee operations, it was unclear if she received authorization to command the troops, but if she did receive such authority, that would completely change things.

The situation in Jiangnan was dire. Although the Maitreya Cult had not managed to sweep through Jiangnan as they had initially expected, their actions had still led to the formation of local separatist forces, which were likely giving Tang Wanzhuang a headache. Whether Xia Longyuan weighed in on this was unknown, but it was likely that the fake Xia Longyuan had given Tang Wanzhuang some authority to act.

Of course, there was also the possibility that Tang Wanzhuang had become tired of playing by the rules and decided to take matters into her own hands. With her prestige and the Tang Clan behind her, it would not be difficult for her to seize military power. She could likely rally many of the local

militias in Jiangnan under her banner. However, this would border on holding military power independently, and it was uncertain whether the loyal Tang Wanzhuang would actually be willing to do that.

As these thoughts swirled in his mind, Xiangyang came into view.

From a distance, Zhao Changhe observed the flags of Xiangyang. At first glance, nothing seemed unusual. The city walls still bore the dragon flag of Great Xia, alongside a command flag with the large character Lu.

He vaguely recalled Lu Wende[3] of Xiangyang... However, the city lord had nothing to do with that character. The city lord of Xiangyang was Lu Shiheng, the Divine Sword of Xiang River, forty-eighth on the Ranking of Man.

This title, similar to Yue Hongling's Sunset Divine Sword and Chi Li's Fox Spirit, was bestowed by the Tome of Troubled Times and carried significant prestige.

Anyone with such a prestigious title on the Ranking of Man was no pushover. They were undoubtedly a master who had unlocked the Profound Mysteries.

For that matter, the general from the Maitreya Cult leading the attack on Xiangyang was a rogue ranked just a few places above Lu Shiheng at forty-four—Soul Reaper Yu Cixiu.

Yu Cixiu was not originally a member of the Maitreya Cult. He was a well-known demonic figure in the south who was likely recruited by Maitreya in the past year with promises of wealth and beauties.

I wonder if he adopted a Dharma name, maybe something like Fa Xiu?

Zhao Changhe thought his own made-up Dharma name Fa Dian sounded better.

Along with the support from the Xue Canghai of the Blood God Cult, who was ranked seventy-first but had strength far surpassing that now, this battle would see the convergence of multiple figures on the Ranking of Man. It would certainly be a fierce showdown.

Lost in thought, he had unknowingly reached the city gates with his horse.

The gates were not as tightly closed as they should be during wartime. There was still a steady flow of people entering and exiting. Lu Shiheng probably was not aware that the Maitreya Cult was conspiring with the Blood God Cult to launch a major attack on his city. However, the gate inspections were strict, and the entrance fee was high.

“Stop! What business do you have here?” Several guards pointed their spears at Zhao Changhe.
“Your travel permit!”

This time, Zhao Changhe actually had a travel permit. An organization like the Blood God Cult had plenty of fake identities prepared. Cult Leader Xue had at least a hundred ready-to-use travel permits, and he had given Zhao Changhe one.

He obediently took out the permit and handed it over. The guard glanced at it and asked, “A scholar from the capital, traveling south to study? There are still people who think they can travel south to study... Your name is Zhao Wangtang[4]?”

Zhao Changhe: “?”

When Zhao Changhe got the permit, he did not bother to check what name was on it.

Old Xue, the fuck kind of name is this?

The guard extended his hand. “Alright, that will be one tael of silver for entry.”

Zhao Changhe now understood what it meant to be truly robbed.

Bandits could learn a thing or two from officials.