

T. Times 46

Chapter 46: Meetings Come and End

Clang!

As his saber met a sword, Zhao Changhe was sent sliding back a few zhang. He lunged forward with a single step and supported himself with his saber, stopping himself from going backward any further.

As he looked up, he saw Yue Hongling gently raise her sword to deflect the small stone he had secretly shot toward her while he was sent flying backward. She leisurely sheathed her sword.

Both people looked at each other, smiling.

“Your saber arts are getting better and better. I’m surprised you could actually withstand Setting Sun Ravages the Sky.”

“That’s because you let me, big sister. You didn’t fight seriously.”

“All I did was suppress my qi. I didn’t hold back when it came to sword arts. This move of mine has innumerable variations. You have no idea how many people hold grudges toward me for that reason... Your improvement is indeed fast.” Yue Hongling laughed. “That said, you’re brave and valiant. When you raise your saber, you’re an unstoppable force. Why did you resort to dirty tricks? Who taught you to shoot stones while you’re losing?”

Zhao Changhe spoke shamelessly. “After learning these concealed weapon arts, wouldn’t it be a waste if I didn’t use them? Big sister, you taught me well.”

“Pfft. I have never taught you to fight in such a shameless, dishonorable way. Why don’t you throw dust in my eyes while you’re at it!”

Zhao Changhe’s eyes lit up, like he thought of something. After a while, he said, “I do indeed have a pouch of dust... We’re training, so I naturally won’t use it on you.”

“...don’t tell others I’ve trained you before when you travel in the future. I’ll be too ashamed to show my face to them.”

“Winning is more important. The Tome of Troubled Times thinks similarly.”

The two of them spoke as they returned to the hut. However, their steps gradually became slower and slower until they eventually stopped in silence.

Yue Hongling had been here for half a month. She could not keep staying here and endure the pain of pretending to be a mountain mistress.

Zhao Changhe constantly made sure to maintain a normal relationship with Yue hongling and absolutely avoid, at any cost, any ambiguity about who they were to each other like what had happened with Luo Qi. He hoped that this would allow her to be more at ease while Yue Hongling lived here.

Yue Hongling had indeed stayed longer than she had expected. Her two or three days had turned into four, then half a month... However, in the end, she had to leave. This sparring match today was basically enough to tell her that it was about time. Zhao Changhe was only waiting for her to say her farewells now.

These past few days, Zhao Changhe knew just how much he had improved. To say that he had been reborn would not be an overstatement.

Putting aside the martial art guidance he received and his newly acquired concealed weapon arts, his use of saber arts in battle was enough to justify saying that he was basically a different person altogether.

In the past, he thought himself strong in battle and able to fight people with higher cultivations... Just what kind of small fry have I been fighting in this countryside place? Have I ever seen anyone use high-level techniques? Have I experienced any changes I’m satisfied with? Just how many marvelous techniques from the myriad clans and sects have I seen fused together? Just how many illustrious fighting philosophies have I seen in battle?

All this experience could not be replaced by just practicing at home.

His battles in the past would never give him such experiences. Only Yue Hongling, the Second Hidden Dragon, known through the lands under heaven, someone that Instructor Sun could not hold a candle to, could give him this.

It was clear for all to see how impressive Zhao Changhe's improvement was when it came to saber arts and fighting capability.

Yue Hongling even gave him other saber art manuals. Thanks to them, he thoroughly broke out of the narrow scope of the Vicious Blood Saber Art. He began to see just how vast the lands under heaven were; he saw the arts of each clan and sect and began to incorporate them into his own understanding of saber arts.

Zhao Changhe knew there was no longer much of a point in continuing to spar with Yue Hongling. No matter how much experience she had accumulated wandering the jianghu, it was still the experience of a single person. What use was there in only fighting the same person? The jianghu was vast, filled with millions of warriors all waiting to meet him.

She had taught him how to pinpoint an enemy's position using his hearing and other senses. How could he not long for a day where he could step into the jianghu

by himself and use that ability?

Yue Hongling's desire to fill in the gaps in his experience to redeem herself was now truly fulfilled. It was time for her to return to the jianghu.

This was where they would part.

The two of them stopped outside the building and looked at each other, waiting for the other to say something. In the end, no one said anything.

After a while, Zhao Changhe found a clumsy reason to speak. "Tonight is the Lantern Festival, why don't you celebrate..."

Yue Hongling, who was filled with a strange feeling of farewell, was amused by his words. She wanted to say something but her expression suddenly changed.

A second after he sensed she felt something was wrong, Zhao Changhe turned to face the courtyard wall. “Who are you!?”

Yue Hongling smiled contently. Zhao Changhe had really mastered everything she taught him. In the past, even if he heard the subtle sounds his enemies made in the wind, he would have thought it was just that—the wind. Now, however, he was skilled enough to pick up that an enemy was approaching them.

Zhao Changhe, as he was now, was ready to wander the jianghu.

A big, rough man appeared atop the courtyard wall with an amazed expression. “I never thought a little second-layer kid like you would be able to sense me when I’m not deliberately revealing my presence.”

Zhao Changhe asked indifferently. “Who are you? I don’t like people who make a show out of being polite.”

The big man smiled. “I am Lin Feihu from the Black Tiger Gang. Has a little baby like you heard of me before?”

Zhao Changhe had, in fact, heard of him. After being here for so long, how could he not have heard of the notable figures from neighboring regions? Lin Feihu was the leader of the Black Tiger Gang, which engaged in looting and other shady businesses, and a cultivator at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate.

Zhao Changhe’s expression turned grave. This was a real pain in the ass.

Thinking about how he had arrogantly hung up that board and waited for people to challenge him, Zhao Changhe realized that he had been overly arrogant. He thought that stronger cultivators should have been more familiar with the workings of the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, but to his surprise, there really were idiots who did not. You’re at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate, yet you come to challenge a second layer? Have you no shame?

As he thought this, Lin Feihu fixed his gaze on Yue Hongling and laughed heartily. “I heard that the stronghold mistress here looked like Yue hongling. It’s really as the rumors say! Woman, what future do you have with this little baby? Why don’t you come along with me!”

At the same time, his hands stretched out like a hawk spreading its wings and he pounced toward Yue Hongling with one big hand ready to grab her.

“....”

Zhao Changhe and Yue Hongling's eyes went wide.

I thought you came to challenge me for my spot on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons, but this is what you decide to do? Oh, wait, you're right. You technically are challenging someone on the Ranking of Hidden Dragons.

Swoosh.

As a sword flashed across, the sky was filled with a scarlet glow.

Zhao Changhe's mouth twitched and he put back the saber he had just drawn. Lin Feihu had offended Yue Hongling. He wanted her for himself, but how in the world could a man like him possibly snatch her away...

“Y-you... You're the real fucking Yue Hongling... Fu...cough!” Gang Leader Lin covered his throat with his hands as he staggered backward. Before he could even finish his sentence properly, he fell down and took his last breath, dying with an incredulous expression.

As he died, he kept trying to understand why the real Yue Hongling was here... How could Yue Hongling possibly be the stronghold mistress...

Zhao Changhe stood by the side with his hands clasped in silence.

I say. Why do you people keep courting death like this...

Yue Hongling sheathed her sword. She did not know what to say before, but after killing the idiot that interrupted them, she was in a good mood. “It looks like it really is time for me to leave. By this point, that stupid board you hung up is not doing anything, but my presence here has started attracting trouble for you.”

Zhao Changhe felt all of this to be a pain in the ass. “It’s likely that these people have been sent here by Fang Buping to instigate things... If you’re here, you can cut down all these troubles. If you leave, won’t I be in a miserable position?”

“What’re you scared of? It’s just a lowly branch master targeting you.”

Zhao Changhe did not respond.

“I must leave one way or another, and if I find an excuse to do that, then you should shut up about it.” Yue Hongling’s tone was gentle. “During my time here, I knew what you were doing... Both of us were embarrassed when I came here, but you always did your best to avoid any more of those situations and never took the chance to have your way with me. Zhao Changhe, you are honest and upright...you’re a truly heroic person. But you know that I cannot stay here, much less as the stronghold mistress. My heart cannot bear it.”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “I’m not as upright as you say. After all, don’t I still want you to stay and have fun at the festival tonight?”

“Festival after festival—just how many festivals are there? Since our time together ends here, what benefit is there in delaying any longer?”

Yue Hongling returned to the building, and when she came out, she was dressed in those red robes she was so fond of, with her traveling bag by her side.

That bandit-like stronghold mistress appearance faded away like mist. It would never be seen again.

Zhao Changhe remained where he stood, not uttering a single word.

Yue Hongling strode out. When she passed Zhao Changhe, she casually patted him on the shoulder. “I’m going, stronghold master. The waves of jianghu surge. I hope that your heart remains as it is in the future. When the time comes, when fate brings us together once more...we can celebrate the Lantern Festival together!”

Zhao Changhe stood on the mountain peak in silence as he watched that red-cloaked heroine travel far, far away. He suddenly realized he hadn’t seen that black-maned horse of hers at all. She probably left it in the city for someone to take care of it for when she left.

She never belonged here.

Her leaving looked sudden, but in actuality, she could have left any time she wanted. This past half a month was already long enough. If other people knew of what she did, like Cui Yuanyong for example, their jaws would drop to the floor.

He thought that familiarizing himself with Yue Hongling would subvert the image he had of her in his heart. However, the more he got to know her, the more he realized she was, in fact, exactly the Yue Hongling he idolized. His initial impression of her never shattered.

Hearing of a raid from a demonic cult, she traveled a thousand li to warn the village.

On the road, she saved a youth and pushed him to learn martial arts.

She thought he had met with misfortune and searched for him across the lands.

She found him, guided him, and succeeded in training him.

Then, she left.

Free and easy.

Zhao Changhe was glad that the first thing he had seen in jianghu was the chivalrous Yue Hongling. Regardless of what evils he had seen in this bandit's nest of a demonic cult and how low the people around him were, the glow of the setting sun would always shine on the horizon—and that was where his jianghu was.

Was Zhao Changhe really honest and upright? When there was a beauty in his home, did he really have no other thoughts?

Of course he had other thoughts.

It was only that he did not want to stain this jianghu dream of his.

Zhao Changhe turned around. Dusk had come and gone and a full moon rose above the willow trees.

The Lantern Festival? That has nothing to do with me... After these few days of specialized training fusing my internal and external arts, the third layer of the Profound Gate is not that far off anymore.

She says she doesn't belong here? She's right. And neither do I.

Once I reach the third layer of the Profound Gate, it will be time to take my saber and leave Beimang.

Chapter 47: Mountain Bandit and Nobility

Zhao Changhe had long since wanted to leave this small pool, but he was constantly unsure of when he should leave. He stayed here because he wanted to cultivate, but he had no way of predicting how his cultivation would develop.

That was, until now.

When he just transmigrated to this world, with no way of acquiring martial arts, Zhao Changhe absolutely had no idea that he would leisurely reach the point of breaking through to the third layer of the Profound Gate in just a few short months. It had only been half a month since he reached the second layer of the Profound Gate and he already had grand plans to reach the third!

Instructor Sun and Fang Buping were both at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate. They were already thirty and had trained for over twenty years. People like them were considered elites of the vast jianghu. Fang Buping could take on the role of branch master, and Instructor Sun's position as right-hand man was not much lower than Fang Buping's. Lin Feihu, who was also at the fourth layer, could become a gang leader.

One layer of the Profound Gate was one layer of heaven. Many in this world could squander their entire life away and never see the end of it.

Of course, all this depended on one's aptitude and access to martial arts. Not everyone needed to train for one to two decades. Yue Hongling was twenty and had already reached the eighth layer. Zhao Changhe did not know what kind of fortunate encounter she had in the jianghu and could not compare himself to her.

People in general were mediocre, but even the mediocre experienced their own highs and lows.

Xia Chichi was also naturally gifted and intelligent. From a young age, her mother had taught her a first-rate internal art. At sixteen, she was already at the fifth layer. After being purified by the Azure Dragon Seal and with the full support of the Four Idols Cult, it was completely possible for her to reach the same level as Yue Hongling by the age of eighteen or nineteen or even surpass her.

However, Zhao Changhe had nothing going for him from the start. A large number of people had seen him, including Venerable Vermillion Bird, who was at the level of a master, and their first judgement of Zhao Changhe's future was that he had none. He was too old, having only begun his training at the age of nineteen. His foundation was nonexistent, and he needed at least a decade to reach the third layer of the Profound Gate, if he could even reach it at all.

The Vicious Blood Art was the only way he could bypass the problem of his age and utilize the advantage brought about by his superior physique. That was why, no matter how bad the side effects got, Zhao Changhe could not abandon this martial art.

If he wanted to cultivate both internal and external arts at the start, there was no way he could get around the problem of his age for internal arts. In the end, though, he managed to obtain Xia Longyuan's inheritance and skipped the introductory phase for learning internal arts. Moreover, this internal art was highly compatible with other martial arts.

Zhao Changhe was still not guaranteed to overcome the disadvantages brought about by his age, even with this art, but at least he did not need to work on it as his main cultivation art and have to slowly and painfully knock on the Profound Gate. He could use it to support the Vicious Blood Art, together with additional items, during breakthroughs. And this method could be considered a shortcut among shortcuts.

With such an advantage, why could he not attempt to break through to the third layer of the Profound Gate? Maybe my cultivation speed will decrease in the future, but I don't care.

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The bandits in the stronghold found out that the stronghold mistress had left. For the past few days, the stronghold master had a gloomy face and the entire stronghold was filled with a tense atmosphere. Even those who tended to speak loudly did not dare to do so.

Oh well, we all knew how disobedient Boss Zhao's wife was. There was no way he could control her.

In the future, you shouldn't find a wife that pretty. She looked like Yue Hongling, but what was the point? It's not the real Yue Hongling. After the boss experienced this painful event, no one will dare to want Yue Hongling even if she stands in front of us. All of us know that our future at the stronghold will be tragic. When the time comes, will we be able to run?

Their boss hadn't spoken much these past few days. His sadness appeared to have transformed into pure, unadulterated appetite, and boy...was he able to eat. Every meal, he ate three jin of meat and three big bowls of rice. His underlings could not understand how his stomach was able to support that much food. The stronghold was wealthy now, but if he had eaten like this back when they had little, he would have run the stronghold stores dry all by himself.

After he ate, he practiced barehanded techniques, then saber and archery, and finished everything up with some horse stance while holding boulders weighing hundreds of jin. Then, he went back to his hut to soak in a medicinal bath. Everyone could hear him trying to suppress his pained wailing all through the night. It seemed that his bath was even more concentrated—he'd been doing the same thing before as well, but in the last few days, he had clearly upped the intensity.

After all, his wife ran away. He now has one less source to release his vital essence. He won't be sucked dry and overexert himself anymore.

Nobody had any idea that Zhao Changhe was frantically trying to take in nutrients to develop the flesh, qi, and blood needed to bring the Vicious Blood Art to the third layer. But Zhao Changhe himself dared to have such ideas, and he had only been cultivating for a few months!

Zhao Changhe felt that he had not done enough. Even though he knew that breaking through the bottleneck to the third layer would be difficult, he had indeed underestimated how big the gap between the second and third layers was in terms of how strong his qi and blood needed to be. He had already obtained half the amount of strength needed through eating and medicinal baths. But this method required him to persist for a long period to see any notable effects. It was simply not feasible for him to reach the required amount of strength in so short a time.

All this was really just bodybuilding, and there were no overnight results when it came to bodybuilding.

However, there was also a clear difference between this and bodybuilding: with good medicines, one could immediately make up for the discrepancy in qi and blood. It was much more effective than gulping down egg whites.

“Tiezhu, any news about the medicines I asked you to get from the city?”

“Boss, the Qi and Blood Powder you asked me to get isn’t sold in the city...”

“It’s normal for them not to have it. It’s auxiliary medicine recorded in the fucking manual for the Vicious Blood Art. How could other people sell it? Are you a dumb pig?” Zhao Changhe was displeased. “What about the medicinal ingredients I asked you to get? We can make our own medicines. We’re just brewing a medicinal stew with powders and not making pills. How difficult can it be?”

“They had the medicinal ingredients but I couldn’t get much.” Tiezhu took out a bag. “This is all I got...”

Seeing that there were some medicines, Zhao Changhe’s expression lightened up, but it was still a bit strange. “Why is there so little?”

“Eh, Branch Master Fang frequently buys these same medicines. They use it in large quantities.”

Zhao Changhe was stumped and scratched his head.

This might not be Fang Buping targeting me. If he really was targeting me, then I wouldn’t even be able to get a single bag. It’s because the people at the branch cultivate similar martial arts, so everyone needs the same type of medicines. It’s natural they have to consume a lot of it. It’s normal for this backcountry city to have so few resources.

Stocking up on these medicines was something Zhao Changhe did not account for. But he had never thought he would be able to attempt to break through to the third layer of the Profound Gate so soon, and neither did Fang Buping. Otherwise, the latter would have long since bought everything.

“This is enough. It’ll last a few days. I’ll use it first. You guys go to some cities further away to look for more medicines. It won’t matter if you guys come back a few days late.” Zhao Changhe sighed. “She told me once that one could not rush when it came to martial arts, and I’ve been really anxious these past few days.”

The bandits had strange expressions as they snuck looks at the stronghold master. Having one's wife run away from them was truly pitiable. It had already been a few days and Zhao Changhe still only talked about his training.

Zhao Changhe knew what everyone was thinking but could not be bothered to argue with them. There was no way he could tell them that the stronghold mistress was actually Yue Hongling. She finished what she set out to do and just up and left? No one's gonna believe that.

He took the medicines and quietly returned to his hut, letting the rest of them speak whatever they wanted.

He felt that he grew considerably with each farewell.

It was the new year. He could be considered one year older—he was now twenty.

It had only been a few months in this world, but he kept feeling that he had grown up quicker during these few months than in all the years of his life prior. Is this what they mean by the saying “the jianghu makes one grow older?”

Zhao Changhe looked at the steam rising from the medicine pot and could not help but laugh.

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“Your cultivation these few days can be considered quite focused. You're not jumping around like a rabbit like how you used to.” Cui Yuanyong heaved a heavy sigh as he looked at his little sister. “If you could settle your mind and focus like this before, how could you still be at the trifling second layer of the Profound Gate? Among everyone from our family, you have the greatest natural aptitude. It's a pity you waste your talents like this.”

“Alright, alright. People have told me that ever since I started training as a young girl. I'm sick of it. It's enough for you guys to train well, why do I have to train? It's tough, it's tiring, and I have no interest in it.”

“If you were like ladies from other houses, content with poetry and needlework, and married into a good family in the future, there would be no problem. But you want to capture wanted criminals

and think being a bounty hunter is very interesting. Yet, you also don't put in the work. Are you trying to court death?"

"Who in this world dares to touch the people of the Cui Clan?"

"Troubled times are upon us. When they arrive, there's no guarantee the name of the Cui Clan will be of use everywhere. And it goes without saying that the Four Idols Cult is eager to slaughter our Cui Clan's people and use us in their sacrificial rituals. Do you think that Father and our brothers can protect you your whole life?" Cui Yuanyong sighed once more. "You're already nineteen. It's time for you to grow up."

"My birthday is at the end of the year! It's still early!"

"Alright, alright." Cui Yuanyong had no way of convincing his little sister, so he just shook his head. He handed her a single medicinal pill. "Your progress these past few days is acceptable. If you keep this up, you'll be ready to break through in ten days. We won't need the two months I said earlier. This is a Mystery Clearing Pill. It'll allow you to smoothly break through your bottleneck when the time comes."

"How stingy. Only one pill?"

"Okay, okay, okay. I'll give you three pills." Cui Yuanyong sighed again. "If you really think you don't have enough... Zhao Changhe has been sending people to the city to buy medicines. He's pitifully scrounging up low-grade medicinal ingredients. You're able to use high-grade medicinal pills and you still complain that it's not enough?"

"What's he buying medicine for? Is he sick?"

"If I'm not wrong, he's probably planning to break through to the third heavenly layer as well." Cui Yuanyong looked at his little sister with a telling expression. "He's only been cultivating for three months and he has reached where he is only by relying on the resources in his mountain stronghold. He's so poor that he literally needs to take food from others to feed himself."

The young lady's eyes went wide. "That's impossible! I'll definitely beat him to it!"

Chapter 48: Defeat

Time passed by quickly. It had almost been a month since Yue Hongling left. Zhao Changhe made it through the month without much happening. It was already the second month. Spring was here and the flowers were in bloom.

The medicines had been used up. Not just the qi and blood powder, they even ran out of the medicines used for Zhao Changhe's daily medicinal baths. Because Zhao Changhe had sent people everywhere to buy medicines, Fang Buping caught wind of what he was doing and began snatching up medicines to compete with him. Eventually, there was none left. The neighboring cities also ran out of stock.

What was even more troubling was that Fang Buping had finally recovered from the wounds Venerable Vermillion Bird inflicted on him as punishment.

Zhao Changhe had managed to earn a lot from idiots challenging him. He gave away a small amount of the money to the branch to show, at least symbolically, that the Beimang Mountain Stronghold was still subordinate to the Blood God Cult. As for Fang Buping's requirement for them to give up half of whatever they earned—I won't give him shit.

However, this morning, Fang Buping had sent someone over and the emissary arrogantly demanded that half of the stronghold's resources be handed over.

Fang Buping had sure become haughty after he recovered. He could finally vent the discontentment he felt toward Zhao Changhe and held back these few months.

"Stronghold Master Zhao, is the Beimang Mountain Stronghold still one of the Blood God Cult's strongholds? Do you intend for the stronghold to become independent, Stronghold. Master. Zhao?"

"Ha, what are you saying? We're all brothers of the cult. Come sit down."

The man shrugged and looked at the sky. "The Branch Master said that you came to an agreement with him that every month, half of whatever the stronghold earns shall be handed over to the branch. However, the stronghold only gave the branch eighty-eight taels of silver last month. What is the meaning of this? Regarding the matter of the authorities coming to weed out bandits that was brought up between you and the branch master, the branch master has helped you flawlessly. In these few months, have there been any imperial troops coming to stir up trouble here? I don't think so."

Zhao Changhe sneered at him in his heart. The authorities didn't come? What do you think Cui Yuanyong came here to do? With him around, do the little authorities in the city have to do anything? All they need to do is to serve Young Master Cui and make sure he's well fed, has a place to piss and shit, and that's all.

He hasn't made a move yet because he saw that Yue Hongling was here. It'd be strange if Fang Buping was the one holding Cui Yuanyong back. Why the fuck would he care about Fang Buping? On the other hand, wasn't that Lin Feihu or whatever sent by Fang Buping to stir up trouble?

In the end, Zhao Changhe said none of this out loud. He leaned back on his seat and replied leisurely. "The agreement was for the stronghold's earnings to be handed over, but these earnings from the past two months are basically a bonus from people challenging me. It's my own income. I threw some of it into the storehouse because I wanted to share my fortune with the rest of the brothers here. It doesn't mean that it's part of the stronghold's earnings. Eighty-eight taels is quite a lot. You can ask a random brother and see if he agrees."

The surrounding mountain bandits all cowered away by the side where they stood. They all had different thoughts on the matter.

What the boss said makes sense. All we can do is hunt. We only just started following the ex-stronghold mistress' advice and planted some crops, so nothing's come out of it yet... The earnings of the stronghold today really just come from people challenging the boss. Whatever he earns, he just throws it into the storehouse for us to use. At most, we put in a little more effort into digging traps. The boss is really sharing his fortune with us.

There's no need to say anything about how the boss conducts himself. He's loyal and treats us like brothers.

Unfortunately for them, their stance depended on a lot more than how Zhao Changhe conducted himself.

At the end of the day, Branch Master Fang is at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate and is a high-ranking member of the cult. Who would openly dare to side with you and go against him?

Even more people were thinking that the reason they had so little income was that Zhao Changhe forbade them from looting. Otherwise, how could their earnings be only this much? Are we even bandits anymore? We're even planting fucking crops now!

These people were not driven to become bandits because of a tyrannical official, huge taxes, or anything like that. Each and every one of them had come to the mountain either because they were loafers or because they'd committed a crime. If we were willing to make an honest living growing crops in the past, why the fuck would we have come here...

The emissary broke out in laughter. "Right, right, look at how many of your brothers agree with you! No shit, you're the stronghold master! Doesn't that mean your income is also the stronghold's income?"

Zhao Changhe took in all of their expressions in a single view and grinned. "You're right. Dashan, take this emissary to the storehouse. Hand him half of whatever's inside."

Following this, a few people's expressions soured.

What was in the storehouse was owned by everyone, and now, a few careless words from Zhao Changhe had just caused half of it to vanish. They felt like their hearts were bleeding. Recently, there were also no idiots coming to challenge Zhao Changhe anymore. How would they gain back their resources? If half of the storehouse was taken away, they would have to go back to eating dirt.

How could they speak in favor of their boss right now?

Zhao Changhe wanted to laugh, but he held himself back and unhurriedly said, "Alright, have three people become his study buddy[1]... Eh wait, I mean have a few people tend to this honored emissary sent by the branch master. Take him to rest in the best house we have. Tonight we feast on roasted lamb. Remember to save a lamb shank for our honored emissary. That's all. Dismissed."

He did not care about the strange expressions of everyone in the Hall of Virtuous Rebellion. He just stood up and left.

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The waters of the pool behind the mountain were still clear and cold. There was no longer any snow around. The trees grew new branches and a floral fragrance wafted from the flowers that now covered the ground. Wild geese were flying south, their cries reaching the heavens.

Zhao Changhe stood silently and suddenly took out his three shi bow. Without even aiming, he let his bow string twang and the arrow flew toward the wild geese.

The arrow was like a shooting star. It pierced through two wild geese and they plopped to the ground.

Zhao Changhe did not go over to inspect them. He was able to see far away, and he was able to clearly discern the geese's wounds. They were not caused by the arrow, but by the spiraling vicious blood qi accompanying it, which left massive holes in the target. A bloody aura lingered, spiraling around the wound. The geese's bones were also completely shattered.

He had successfully picked up archery. His vision and hearing were sharp; everything he perceived was reflected unto his heart. Even if he had not broken through to the third layer, he was right at the bottleneck.

He lacked medicine, however, so breaking through right now was as difficult as cooking without rice. Zhao Changhe had no choice but to slow down his ambitious steps. At the same time, this further strengthened his resolve to leave.

If even the resources I need for cultivation at the second and third layers are this scarce, the fuck am I going to do once I reach an ever higher cultivation?

The emissary sent by Fang Buping had left, but it was painfully clear that he would come back again to stir up trouble. Just like how Yue Hongling had left after saying it was time, his period of rest and growth was also reaching its end.

He pondered for a moment and hid his bow by a tree at the back before leaving.

Even though he felt that he was not ready, Zhao Changhe planned to attempt breaking through to the third layer tonight. Whether he succeeded or not, he had a plan.

Tomorrow was the Insect's Wake [2]. While insects had yet to burrow through the ground, why did a dragon have to hide itself?

He returned to his hut, soaked in his final medicinal bath, drank his final portion of medicinal soup, showered, changed his clothes, then slowly took up a bizarre stance.

At the third layer for the Vicious Blood Art, one no longer practiced the horse stance. Instead, the stance he had to take up now was similar to that of the statue of David. It was very embarrassing. Furthermore, what was even more embarrassing was that he had to slowly change positions... However, this was more beneficial for the circulation of his vicious blood qi and helped his blood qi permeate into his flesh and bones from his blood vessels.

Once vicious blood spread throughout one's body, the Vicious Blood Art would be greatly strengthened. There was naturally no problem with Yue Hongling's judgment. This was indeed a martial art with an extremely high upper limit. Among the myriad types of external arts, those that could temper one's bones and internal organs alike were few in number.

It was just that as one reached the later stages of the Vicious Blood Art, more energy and nutrients were needed. And... it became more painful to cultivate.

He could clearly feel the vicious qi surge within his blood and seep into his flesh, slowly spreading to his skin... Gradually, a sharp pain began to assault him. Hot blood rushed to his head and more and more of his mind was taken over by malevolence. He wanted to rip apart everything in front of him to drain away the urge for violence in his heart and release the pain he felt.

Zhao Changhe knew that if there was another person around, they would think that he was about to go berserk, like a wild beast with scarlet eyes.

While Zhao Changhe's mind was still intact, Xia Longyuan's internal art activated itself and a wisp of coolness flowed from his huiyin acupoint to his chest, then upstream into the arteries of his heart, and lastly to his forehead, ensuring that Zhao Changhe's consciousness was not extinguished.

However, the more awake he was, the harder the pain was to endure. The berserk state brought about by the Vicious Blood Art, from a certain standpoint, could be said to allow one to ignore or dissipate the pain from their body—that, of course, if they were willing to forsake their humanity.

Zhao Changhe, of course, did not want that.

Wisps of qi swam from his dantian into his meridians. They spread throughout his muscles and bones, alleviating some of the pain.

Whether it was with Xia Chichi's assistance or relying on Xia Longyuan's internal art, internal arts could only help alleviate the side effects of the Vicious Blood Art. They could not prevent them.

The only way to eliminate the side effects was to use the Blood Settling Pill that Instructor Sun had given him. Until now, Zhao Changhe had not eaten a single pill.

Once he began relying on it, he could forget about ever being free.

It's enough for me that internal arts can alleviate the symptoms... With my manly bones of steel, how can I not endure this bit of pain?

While his head was muddled, he seemed to hear someone making noise outside. It sounded like there was someone knocking the door. Zhao Changhe, in his chaotic state, did not pay it any heed and continued attacking the final barrier between him and the third layer, ignoring just how exhausted he was.

After enduring for some time, Zhao Changhe could feel that his clothes were drenched in sweat. He almost managed to force his vicious blood qi into every part of his skin. Almost.

Just one bit was left, but that one percent could just as well be ninety-nine.

No matter how much pain he endured or how many times he attempted to break through this final barrier, if he did not have enough strength, then he did not have enough.

He did not have enough strength. He did not have enough medicine. The time he had was too short.

At the end of the day, he was not a genius favored by heaven.

"Fuck!" Zhao Changhe opened his eyes in rage. He smashed the bathtub in his room with a kick and the medicinal water spilled everywhere—a symbol of his failure to breakthrough.

"Boss, boss!" Listening to things inside the building quiet down, the person outside anxiously shouted, "Boss, you're finally awake..."

Zhao Changhe panted, exhausted, and asked furiously, "What happened!?"

"Someone snuck into the stronghold tonight. She's stuck in one of the traps... But her sword art is too strong. Everyone's been trying to deal with her for an hour, but we still can't restrain her..."

Chapter 49: Borrow Your Head

Zhao Changhe suppressed his rage at his failure. There still remained some malevolence in his eyes as he strode to where the trap was.

It was a trap within the stronghold, right beside the training grounds. Zhao Changhe personally asked someone to dig one here and said that no one would ever expect there to be traps in such a place. Yue Hongling was standing by the side then and heard everything... None of them thought that they would catch a fish with it.

However, Yue Hongling instructed the bandits to remove the spikes underneath the traps so that the traps would solely be used to capture enemies. This intruder was lucky. If there were spikes below, she would have been pierced into a sieve, so how would she struggle like she was now?

Zhao Changhe walked to the side to take a look. A group of bandits stood around the deep pit with spears, jabbing them downward one after the other. A sword shone in the pit, however, and no matter how many spears were thrust down, they could not hurt her one bit.

The intruder's blade also appeared to be a valuable one. Numerous spears had been split apart by it, leaving only short staves in the hands of the bandits. Still, there were just too many people. With waves upon waves of attacks coming at her, the intruder could not escape.

Zhao Changhe was speechless. It's like looking at a bunch of fucking birds pecking at each other. She's already trapped inside and this is the best you guys can do? It's been a full hour and you're all still struggling to run her through?

You at the bottom as well. From your sword art and valuable sword, you must have obtained some high-level inheritance. You're probably also at the second or third layer of the Profound Gate for internal arts. With such a cultivation, when you step on a trap, shouldn't you feel that something is off and immediately use movement art to maneuver away? How did you fall into a random fucking pit? Are you like Yue Hongling back when she had sword qi running amuck inside her?

Did a dog teach you this way of dealing with enemies and unforeseen circumstances?

"Boss!"

"The boss is here!"

“Look at how aggressive this woman is!”

The bandits ceased their attacks to move aside and formed a straight path for Zhao Changhe to walk through. With this short pause, cold sword qi burst from the hole. The intruder almost made it out of her situation.

Unfortunately, a sanguine moon suddenly appeared, accompanied by a soft harrumph. A saber shone through the air and the sword was deflected back into the hole with a deafening clang.

Zhao Changhe stood by the side of the hole and looked down. A young lady glared at him with her head raised. Her eyes spoke of an unwillingness to submit and betrayed some terror.

She was rather haggard. From head to toe, she was drenched with dripping sweat. It looked as if the hole she was in had cold water on the bottom, as per Yue Hongling’s advice. Even though it’s warmer in spring, it’s still pretty cold. Will she be able to endure this with her cultivation?

Zhao Changhe was extremely irritated and could not be bothered thinking so much about it. He immediately said, “I’ll give you two options. One: you continue resisting and we roll a huge boulder into the hole. You’ll be turned into paste and we’ll use you to fertilize the flowers.”

The young lady’s face, which had an expression indicating her unwillingness to submit, suddenly went stiff.

It’s over. I thought I could hold on for a while longer. Once elder brother realizes I’m missing, he’ll definitely come looking for me, but this...

The faces of the bandits by the side were all flushed with excitement. They had been in a stalemate for an hour, but it was actually this simple.

Zhao Changhe continued, “Two: you throw your sword out and surrender. I’m in need of a new stronghold mistress.”

The woman’s face was red with rage. “Just crush me! I’d rather die than surrender.”

“Tsk. You’re incapable, but you sure have a temper.” Zhao Changhe began loosening his belt. “It doesn’t look like your sword arts are at the point where you can deflect even drops of water. I just woke up and didn’t have time to pee. I’ll send you a whole stream.”

The woman was stupefied. “You lowlife! No, wait—wait a moment...”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t pee! I—I’ll surrender.”

The bandits: “...”

How did we not think of doing this? No, wait, would it have even worked?

The woman murmured, “You—you can’t touch me. I’m with the imperial court.”

Which fucking rich family has this woman just come running from to be this naïve? One of the imperial court’s people? We’re fucking bandits! Who do you think we play with if not people from the imperial court?

Seeing her helplessly throw her sword out, numerous scenes—the sort one would find in erotica—flashed through the bandits’ minds.

To Zhao Changhe, someone from the imperial court was of use to him, but not that much. This woman’s naïveté made him want to laugh. Her temper had faded away significantly compared to just moments before.

He picked up her sword and sized it up for a while. “You guys go back to what you’re supposed to do. If there’s nothing wrong, don’t come and bother us.”

The bandits made eyes at him as they left. Afterward, Zhao Changhe struck one of the woman’s acupoints and picked her up. “Let’s go, young lady. My hut’s open for you.”

“You can’t make me your mountain mistress,” the young woman said angrily. “Wait till my brother arrives. He’ll slaughter your entire stronghold!”

“Oho, you have a backer?” Zhao Changhe found the whole thing to be truly amusing. “Enough, woman. I’m not a good person, but I’m also not a child lover. I have absolutely no interest in that body of yours. It’s just that I haven’t met anyone related to the imperial court. There are some matters I would like to clarify.”

The woman was unafraid of death. “Whatever you ask, I won’t answer.”

“Tch.” Zhao Changhe sneered and made a motion that looked like he was going to take off his belt.

The young woman’s expression changed dramatically. “You dare!?”

“I said that if you surrendered, I wouldn’t pee on your head. I never said I wouldn’t do something else, did I?”

“You lowlife! Shameless! Utterly shameless!”

Of course, Zhao Changhe just wanted to scare her a little. Before anything happened that needed to be censored, however, someone suddenly knocked on the door. “Boss, boss!”

Zhao Changhe furrowed his brow. “What happened?”

“Branch Master Fang has come. He says that the intruder from the imperial court must be handed over to the branch. We are not to do anything to her. Those are the rules.”

“Fuck him!” Zhao Changhe laughed coldly. “Can he fly? How is he here so soon? Someone must have sent word at least an hour ago. It’s so clear that he’s come to purposely snatch away my women for himself and only found out that she was with the imperial court after arriving. Who’s he trying to deceive?”

The one outside the door did not dare to speak.

“Enough. Where is he?”

“He’s on the mountain road and is about to arrive at the stronghold.”

“I understand. I’ll bring this woman to him myself.”

The person outside spoke no more.

Zhao Changhe turned to look at the woman. Her face was pale as she returned his gaze.

“Heh, you should know what’ll happen after you surrender.” Zhao Changhe pulled her out the door and dragged her outside the stronghold.

“Zhao Changhe! It was my mistake to think you were a real man! You should not bend the knee to curry favor with this branch master... Eh?”

Before she finished speaking, the young woman realized her acupoints were unblocked. Her sword, which had been confiscated, was also forced into her hand.

“Are you fucking stupid? Who told you that there’s only one gate in the stronghold? This is the rear gate!” Zhao Changhe waved his hand. “Hurry up and run. With how stupid you are, you should train for another three years before asking First Seat Tang for a mission. Don’t think that every bandit you meet will be as willing to talk reason as I am.”

The young woman was dumbstruck as she looked at him. “You... You know who I am?”

“Aren’t you the one First Seat Tang sent?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, there you go.” Zhao Changhe said impatiently. “In any case, I don’t care who you are, who sent you, and why you’re here. I won’t do something that despicable. When you said you were with the imperial court, I actually did intend to ask you about some matters. Since we don’t have time anymore, hurry up and run. I still have things to do, so piss off.”

The woman said, “You—your branch master is at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate. You’re not even at the third layer yet. Once he finds out you let go a prisoner from the imperial court, what’re you going to do...”

“Eh? You’re only realizing this now?” Zhao Changhe chuckled. “Enough. I have my ways. Just don’t stay here and get in the way of my business.”

The young woman lowered her head and pursed her lips. After stammering for a while, she suddenly took out two moist medicinal pills from her pocket. “This pill will assist you in breaking through to the third layer. Thank you. I—I’ll immediately find someone to help you!”

She then stamped her feet and flew away. She knew that at her current skill level, she would only be a hindrance to Zhao Changhe, so she went to get reinforcements instead.

Zhao Changhe was at a loss for a moment. Her movement art was both elegant and incomparably nimble. She was absolutely from a prestigious background. Just what kind of powerful family would let such a naive child come here to die? I swear to go—hold on, wait a second... Cui Yongyuan is nearby. He’s from a distinguished family and has a little sister.

He lowered his head in silence and looked at the medicinal pill in his hand. No way. Is this medicine from the Cui Clan?

He raised it to his nose and took a whiff. Immediately, he felt something stir in his dantian.

It was obvious this was a pill for internal arts cultivators. It was of use to the Eight Blind Gates and not the Vicious Blood Art... He was now using the qi from this internal art to support his use of the Vicious Blood Art. Could I try breaking through again?

I don’t even care anymore. Fang Buping is at my doorstep.

Zhao Changhe dropped the pill into his mouth and devoured it. As the qi in his dantian began to swirl, he strode to the Hall of Virtuous Rebellion.

Wang Dashan and the others were currently inside laying food and drinks on the table to welcome Fang Buping before he graced them with his presence. They were all dumbstruck as they looked at Zhao Changhe. “Boss, what happened to the girl?”

Zhao Changhe casually walked up to Wang Dashan and smiled. “I’ll tell you what happened to her in a while. I first need to borrow something from you.”

Wang Dashan did not know what he meant and just smiled. “What’re you saying? Boss, you can take whatever you want. Why speak of borrowing? What do you want?”

“I want to break through to the third layer for the Vicious Blood Art. I have everything in order, but I’m just short of something to boost my vicious blood qi.” As Zhao Changhe spoke, he suddenly drew his saber. “I’ve specially come to borrow your head!”

Swoosh!

His saber swung over in a blur and bright-red blood gushed forth.

Wang Dashan’s head flew away with a stunned expression plastered on it.

He—he dares to kill me?

Branch Master Fang is already here...

Everyone present was overwhelmed with horror as they looked at Zhao Changhe. He did not spare any effort to hide the vicious red color of his skin. They all cowered and their legs began to tremble.

Zhao Changhe observed his rumbling dantian. The effects of the medicinal pill were simply terrifying. The qi in his body whirled around, surging through at an incredible rate across his meridians and into his acupoints. He hadn’t intended to open the third Profound Gate for internal arts—the Danzhong acupoint, located at the center of the chest—yet, before he even realized it, he had already broken through.

At the same time, killing intent spewed forth from him as vicious blood qi rushed to his heart meridians and assaulted his consciousness. Qi and blood rushed like a wild current toward the flesh and skin that they had failed to permeate during his prior breakthrough attempt.

His qi, roaring from just having broken through to the third layer, automatically acted to fuse with the vicious blood qi, imbuing his pained flesh and skin with what felt like a loud boom.

Zhao Changhe looked to the sky and roared. He suppressed the intense, sharp pain from his breakthrough and split the large board hanging in the Hall of Virtuous Rebellion with his saber, laughing. “We claim to carry out the will of heaven, yet we have no will. We speak of virtuous rebellion, yet we have no virtue. What use is there for me to stay here!? We’ll meet again someday!”

Chapter 50: The Waking of Insects

In the darkness of night, Zhao Changhe bolted wildly toward the back of the mountain with Fang Buping in close pursuit.

In the moment, it felt amazing to kill that idiot, but Fang Buping had arrived. After killing Wang Dashan, whether Zhao Changhe would be able to survive being chased down by Fang Buping was the real question.

Fang Buping’s expression was quite sinister under the moonlight, and unexpectedly, held a bit of joy. “Zhao Changhe! You have violated the rules of the cult by indiscriminately killing one of your brothers! Where do you think you’re going!? Leave your head behind!”

Fang Buping was truly happy.

He hated Zhao Changhe’s official status as a formal disciple of the cult, and with his backing from the saintess, Fang Buping did not dare mess with him. Even if he wanted to kill Zhao Changhe, there was nothing he could do other than use his authority to give him some trouble and let him suffer in silence.

In the end, Zhao Changhe had unexpectedly lost his cool. After only a bit of teasing and being taken advantage of twice, he had revealed an opening for Fang Buping to exploit.

Wang Dashan was definitely not a brother of the cult. Strictly speaking, Zhao Changhe only murdered a bandit from the mountain stronghold. It was no different from when he killed Zhang Quan and could not be considered breaking the rules of the cult. However, matters like this depended on how one spoke of them. Back then, Instructor Sun said that Zhang Quan was trash and his death meant nothing, so why couldn’t Fang Buping do the opposite? If the branch master said that Wang Dashan was a brother of the cult, he could always alter a few documents to make it seem like that was the case. Zhao Changhe would not be able to dispute it.

Fang Buping was pleasantly surprised.

He knew that Zhao Changhe had just broken through to the third layer of the Profound Gate. His potential was indeed terrifying. To be honest, no matter how hard he thought, Fang Buping could not understand how a man could reach the third layer of the Profound Gate after just cultivating for four months. Everyone here has cultivated the Vicious Blood Art. Is there anyone unaware of how difficult it is to cultivate? Even if this idiot has been secretly practicing an internal art to support himself, isn't this too ridiculous?

No...if this is true, then I need to kill you all the more. We've had beef from the start. Do you really think I'll wait for you to mature? Also, you just reached the third layer. Do you think you're some hot shit? There's no way you've gotten used to the power of the third layer, so what can you do with it?

Fang Buping, though, had been training at the fourth layer of the Profound Gate for many years. Even with just his twenty years of risking his life in battle in the jianghu, fighting experience, and understanding of saber arts, could a greenhorn like Zhao Changhe match up to him?

Do you think you're Yue Hongling, able to defeat Cult Leader Xue at such a young age? Even she's been cultivating from a young age and trained for over a decade, so who the fuck do you think you are?

"Zhao Changhe, you also practice Tracless Soaring Blood. How can you hope to outrun me? Give yourself up obediently and head back to stand trial, hahaha."

"You sure are full of bullshit. Did you become the branch master by sheer volume of shit spewed?"

"...wait till I get my hands on you. You think I'll kill you? You'll fucking wish you could die!"

The sound of Fang Buping's sleeves billowing in the air drew closer, but Zhao Changhe continued rushing ahead, his expression incomparably calm.

Both of them practiced the same movement art, Traceless Soaring Blood. Since Fang Buping had a higher cultivation, he was clearly faster than Zhao Changhe's. If the latter simply ran, he would obviously not be able to outrun the branch master. However, Zhao Changhe never intended to run, but fight. Him escaping from the mountain stronghold was to avoid being caught in a tight encirclement. He merely wanted to draw Fang Buping behind the mountain.

Yue Hongling noted at the beginning of their training that Zhao Changhe had an incredibly clear goal he wanted to reach. She was correct. This goal was Fang Buping.

From the start, being able to defeat Fang Buping was something Zhao Changhe demanded of himself.

Vice Branch Master Huang assumed his position after withdrawing from the branch's elite troops. Fang Buping was different. From the start, he was in command of Instructor Sun and the other elite troops as branch master and well-known in the cult as a general on the border regions. Even though his ranking was a bit low, his battle would be the most difficult and dangerous one Zhao Changhe fought since transmigrating.

Fang Buping's fundamental martial art is not necessarily the Vicious Blood Art. It's possible he combined it with a better martial art from the cult. He might even have part of the Blood God Art.

Furthermore, Traceless Soaring Blood is a movement art that requires one to use internal force. Since Fang Buping also practices it, he must have internal force. He's not someone that just practices external arts. Just like me, he cultivates both! He's reached the fourth layer of the Profound Gate!

What's more, he's a master of saber arts and has plenty of experience. Can I defeat such a person?

Swoosh!

Fang Buping's saber whistled through the air. Even from far away, one would be able to feel the branch master's intent to cut Zhao Changhe down. The muscles in Zhao Changhe's back could not help but tighten.

He's so fast!

Zhao Changhe suddenly turned around and slashed out. He accurately hit the side of Fang Buping's saber.

What the fuck, does he have eyes on the back of his head?!

Zhao Changhe's attack did not use up all of his strength. Very quickly, he lightly pushed off the ground and used the force of the attack to circle around Fang Buping. In the blink of an eye, Zhao Changhe was a few zhang away.

Fang Buping could not help but admire Zhao Changhe's solid foundation. His arms, legs, and saber were in perfect harmony; his attacks were extremely precise, and he had masterful control over his strength. Zhao Changhe's saber art had truly reached a higher level. Moreover, Fang Buping had no idea where he had picked up the ability to determine the position of his enemies using his hearing. Without even looking, Zhao Changhe knew where to strike.

However, it was truly a pity. Zhao Changhe had just broken through to the third layer of the Profound Gate. In terms of raw strength, there was a great disparity between him and Fang Buping.

"Your hands are trembling, aren't they?" Fang Buping resumed the chase and laughed excitedly. "Why run when you can fight a few bouts and let me see how much you can entertain me?"

Zhao Changhe's hands were indeed trembling, but unlike what Fang Buping imagined, his heart was not. On the contrary, he was quite calm.

He did not feel like he was up against an immovable wall. Fang Buping's skill with his saber was not beyond Zhao Changhe's expectations. There was simply a gap in their strength! This meant that Zhao Changhe stood a chance!

He remained silent and continued fleeing. Suddenly, he leapt into the air and jumped over some vegetation ahead.

Fang Buping chuckled and mimicked his jump. "I know the traps in the stronghold like the back of my hand. You want to rely on them to change your fortunes? Hahaha... You must be full of despair right now, aren't you?"

Following his jump, the saber in Fang Buping's hand suddenly turned scarlet and began overflowing with vicious qi. Under the moonlight, it looked incomparably fierce.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

Zhao Changhe could feel that the vicious blood qi in his body was being suppressed by his opponent from behind, to the point that it disturbed his calm. For the first time, his Back Eye actually backfired—seeing that fierce vicious blood qi, his soul was shaken slightly and he actually felt a bit of dread.

However, that feeling only lasted for an instant. How could Zhao Changhe be intimidated by that sort of power? He turned around and slashed out once more.

Clang!

An intense metal-on-metal sound echoed through the night. Zhao Changhe coughed up a mouthful of blood and continued retreating. In midair, he grabbed a vine fluttering in the wind and fiercely stepped on the tree trunk by the side, burrowing the force of this motion to swing toward the pool. He reached it in a single breath.

Fang Buping stumbled somewhat and he was even more stunned.

How is Zhao Changhe able to find the weakest point of my attack, like he's practiced it a hundred thousand times before? It shouldn't be... He couldn't have learned it, right? There's no way he's experienced enough to clearly be able to distinguish the weak points of my attacks. That would be too heaven-defying.

As he thought this, he saw Zhao Changhe swinging on a vine, so he also grabbed one and swung over. However, this motion apparently triggered some mechanism; from all directions, sharpened wooden spears shot toward him.

I allowed that idiot to continue leaking information to you for this very moment to make you believe that you understood everything about the stronghold. Too bad Wang Dashan didn't know shit about the traps I set up by myself!

Fang Buping brandished his saber in mid-air. Even though it looked like he did not put in any strength, his blade was like a dancing pear blossom, shredding all of the wooden spears to pieces in an instant. He felt not even a sliver of danger.

Indeed, Fang Buping was strong and experienced.

Behind a tree by the pool, Zhao Changhe had already picked up his bow and nocked an arrow. The killing intent in his eyes was palpable.

Boom!

The bowstring's twang was like thunder, and an arrow shot out like a shooting star.

Fang Buping, who had just dealt with the threat of the trap, let his guard down for a moment. By the time his brain processed that booming sound, the blurry silhouette of an arrow was already at his face.

Where did that bow come from? He didn't have one on him.

As the thought flashed past his mind, Fang Buping bellowed as he raised his saber to block the arrow.

The arrow qi, twice strengthened by Zhao Changhe's internal art and his vicious blood qi, spiraled outward. An incomparably terrifying vicious blood qi assaulted Fang Buping's meridians and caused the blood and qi in his body to roil. He could not help but retreat a step to resist this formidable attack. In the end, he managed to break the arrow in half.

Before Fang Buping could even heave a sigh of relief, however, a bloody glow suddenly appeared before him.

A blood-red saber streaked across the firmament. Under the moonlight, a figure had leapt from the pool and now floated above him; it looked like a demon high up in the sky.

Scattering the Gods and Buddhas!

This wave after wave of attacks was like the rushing of river water—an unstoppable force!

Clang!

Fang Buping anxiously raised his saber to block the attack. The world-shaking sound of their weapons colliding could be heard even from the far-away stronghold.

The backlash from blocking the arrow had yet to dissipate, and Fang Buping could not yet muster his strength to fully defend. Zhao Changhe had been reserving his strength for this exact moment.

Zhao Changhe had gained the upper hand. After this one attack, their strengths were now comparable.

Both of them coughed out blood, their arms were swelling, and their eyes were red like beasts.

“I never thought you’d be able to hold on this long against me. Impressive...” While they were in a stalemate, in the end, Fang Buping had more strength remaining. He slowly said, “But this is where it ends...”

Before he could finish speaking, however, he was suddenly blinded by something white.

A bag of crushed limestone had burst in his face. He ate no small amount of it, and his eyes were in even more pain than his throat. He could not see anything.

Fuck you. I thought you were a great man of unmatched character. Just as we were enjoying the damn fight and we were going all out like the men we are, you throw some fucking limestone at me?!

A coolness washed over Fang Buping’s throat before he even had the chance to curse at Zhao Changhe.

Amidst the moonlight, everything was silent.

Every orifice in Fang Buping’s head was filled with limestone powder, and blood gushed from his throat as he slowly fell down, staring at the sky. The dull thud as he hit the ground marked the end of this battle...and the end of his life.

Never had it occurred to Fang Buping that his pursuit would end like this.

Zhao Changhe slowly retreated a few steps, exhausted. He stuck his saber into the ground, kneeled, and leaned on it for support while panting heavily.

His wave of attacks, which had been planned out for some time now, had used up all of his strength. He had drawn upon every bit of potential he had. If he could not succeed with this, then he would have surely died.

Indeed, not everyone was a match for the branch master of a demonic cult. Fang Buping was really strong, but the jianghu had uncountably many great men. If Zhao Changhe was to wander the jianghu, fighting people with higher cultivations was clearly not as simple as he had imagined.

As for the limestone? Pft.

The way of Heaven is eternal. It does not exist because of Emperor Yao's benevolence, nor does it perish with Emperor Jie's despotism. Is this not what the Tome of Troubled Times acknowledges?

Zhao Changhe took a deep breath and struggled to pick himself up. Then, he sheathed his saber and strode down the mountain.

"Second brother, hurry! Move faster!" The young lady anxiously pulled her brother as she flew along the road. "He hasn't even broken through to the third layer of the Profound Gate. Fang Buping has been training at the fourth layer for many years, he can't win!"

"I told you to abandon the mission. Who let you sneak into the stronghold at night!"

"You're still talking about this? I'll let you scold me when we're back home!"

Cui Yuanyong could only helplessly follow his little sister as they sped to the mountain. Shortly after stepping onto the mountain path, however, their expressions suddenly changed as they looked to the sky.

A golden light shone in the sky. The Tome of Troubled Times was once again descending upon them.

Third month. Insect's Wake. Zhao Changhe, having only cultivated for four months, broke through to the third layer of the Profound Gate. Immediately after, he cut down Branch Master Fang Buping from the Blood God Cult at Beimang.

The Ranking of Hidden Dragons has changed.

Rank 91: Zhao Changhe.

A long river descends from the nine heavens, flowing into the jianghu.