

Tome of Troubled Times

Chapter 2: Sword Unsheathed

Dusk.

What remained of the sun was like blood.

Crows were circling around a lone village, their mournful calls interwoven with pained wails, making the place seem more like a demonic hellscape.

Zhao Changhe stood in a daze behind a far away tree, looking at the chaos. Before even regaining his senses from the discomfort of traveling between worlds, a small village on the cusp of being wiped out emerged before him.

Shattered pieces of wood from doors and windows littered the ground; the stinging stench of blood wafted out from every household; in front of doors and outside of windows, corpses were strewn around in disarray; the exposed bodies of women were casually tossed aside by the road, covered in marks of defilement.

Men in black clothes were everywhere, wreaking havoc, pillaging buildings, and plundering riches. Zhao Changhe, with his improved eyesight, could clearly see: a man pulled out a woman onto the street and humiliated her right then and there, while a group of black-clothed men laughed.

So this is the so-called "safe starting location?"

As he had appeared in a forest on the village outskirts rather than directly in the village, the marauders had no idea of Zhao Changhe's presence. He could leave discreetly. This was probably why this place was considered safe.

However, there was one black-clothed man who pulled an ox carrying a bunch of bloodstained riches. He shouted impatiently, "That should be about it. How tasty can these village girls be? The sun is about to set. Kill them all. Don't leave any future problems around."

Seeing a black-clothed man raising a butcher's knife to cut down a child, Zhao Changhe flew into a rage. He could not restrain himself, and grabbed a thick branch lying around before rushing out of the forest.

Come to think of it, why is that broad saber gone now? It was here every time...oh, whatever. Who gives a fuck about safety? This is just a dream! Going on past experience, he would wake up when he died. Then, he could go and ask that blind woman what tricks she was up to!

Bang!

The club hurtled toward the black-clothed man, catching him off guard. His blade was knocked away. Zhao Changhe pressed the attack and swung the club again, hitting the man square in the face. Fresh blood splattered everywhere.

The black-clothed man covered his head, screaming in pain. The rest of his companions looked incredulously as Zhao Changhe quickly grabbed the child, turned around, and dashed away. Winning a fight outnumbered was impossible; saving lives was more important.

A man suddenly sneered, "There are actually still some alive. Kill them."

The black-clothed men grinned menacingly as they gave chase. With the child in tow, how could Zhao Changhe outrun them? He could clearly "see" behind him. There was a long saber already heading for his neck.

The Back Eye—it's really working?

Zhao Changhe urgently moved to the side, raising his club to block, but it was immediately split in twain. Though he had swiftly dodged, the saber still cut a long, bloody scar on his face.

With this small delay, the child was cut down by one of the pursuers..

Zhao Changhe could not care about the pain. His mind was blank.

The child was dead... Just like that, his lively form had been hacked to death right in front of Zhang Changhe. He could not save him.

The village looked to be devoid of any life...

"Fuck you!" Zhao Changhe shouted with indignant fury. With the broken club in his hands, he stormed over like a crazed tiger.

"So it's just a peasant that's never trained in any martial art. He can only rely on brute strength." The black-clothed men were all laughing. The man who had been hit in the face earlier dashed over and easily evaded Zhao Changhe's flailing. The saber in his hand deftly slashed at Zhao Changhe's neck.

It was over.

The attack was impossible to dodge.

What a shitty nightmare! Not only is it more disgusting than previous ones, even the difficulty has gone up!

As the thought flashed in his mind, there came the sudden sound of something sharp cutting through the air. A *ding* echoed as the black-clothed man's long saber was struck away.

At the same time, the sound of horse hooves got closer. Before the horse made it here, the rider had already leapt over. Zhao Changhe could only see a flicker—the beautiful silhouette of a woman dressed in red, wrapped in sword qi bright and cold. Flowers of blood suddenly splattered all around; countless screams rang out simultaneously, almost as one, before being abruptly cut off.

It was only then that the horse arrived. The red silhouette remounted it with a flip.

Only until now was Zhao Changhe able to make it out to be a woman dressed in a red *jinzhuang*[1]. She wore her hair in a high ponytail, and below her was a black-maned horse; a red scabbard carrying a longsword hung slanted by her waist. Her beautiful eyes were lightning-bright; her figure was dignified and heroic.

One by one, the black-clothed men all plopped to the ground. They were dead.

Zhao Changhe, who had fought and killed for so long in his muddled dreams, felt for the first time what the novels meant when they said “one sword fells nine geese.”

So these are the martial arts of legend! They really exist!

The woman looked around at the devastation. Her eyes held a little grief. “If only I arrived just a bit earlier,” she muttered to herself softly.

Zhao Changhe was panting heavily. Not even the fear of death could overwhelm the indignation brought about by witnessing this tragedy. He even forgot to thank the woman. He blankly raised his head to ask her, “Who are these people?”

The woman shook her head in silence, only answering after a long time, “I was only passing by... However, there might be some clues. First, I must ask you something, though. Does this road lead to the Luo Family Village?”

So she was simply passing by and just happened to intervene after seeing this scene... How was Zhao Changhe supposed to know what this Luo Family Village was? He only shook his head.

Looking at the state Zhao Changhe was in, the woman could sympathize. She said no more, circling around on horseback. She saw a stone tablet nearby with “Zhao House” written on it. She nodded. “When I last asked for directions, the people said the Luo Family Village was a few tens of li [2] from the Zhao Family house. That means it's indeed this road.”

The woman continued sizing up the corpses of the black-clothed men, frowning as she once again murmured, "So they've come. But why act so rashly and alert their enemies?"

The woman squatted down, carefully searching the bodies of two of the men. She could only find a few silver pieces; there were no other marks she could use for identification. Frowning her brows, she thought for a while but failed to come up with any explanation. Then she turned her head and saw Zhao Changhe still standing over there expressionless. She sighed.

"You... Do you have any family left?"

Zhao Changhe shook his head once more.

The woman said, "I have business to attend to at the Luo Family Village. It wouldn't hurt for you to follow me. You can leave your future affairs to be handled by the village. Over there, you may also find some work and settle down."

Why would Zhao Changhe have to find work in this Luo Family Village? He pondered whether he had strayed from the main objective of entering his dream... However, he had no idea where to start by himself.

Seeing Zhao Changhe hesitate, the woman advised him, "In these times of strife, people who don't know martial arts can only be exploited by others. The Luo Family Village, in any case, is an illustrious family in the great Xia Dynasty. They say the Luo Family even has quite the connection to the Imperial Clan. If you can pick up a few moves there, you might even have some hope of taking revenge. It will also help you settle down."

The Xia Dynasty...

This dream even comes with fucking worldbuilding?

In any case, Zhao Changhe could not be bothered thinking that far. "Big sister, you are so outstanding. Can't you teach me instead?"

"Big sister? You may actually be older than me!" The woman laughed, shaking her head as she spoke. "I roam the *jianghu* and I cannot take in a disciple. The Luo House will suit you quite well. If I bring you there, perhaps they'll even give me some face."

Zhao Changhe could only respond, "Alright then. I was at a loss just now and I forgot to thank you for saving me. May I ask what your name is?"

"Yue Hongling," the woman casually answered. She was, however, a little curious. "Your way of speaking betrays some education. What is your name?"

“Zhao Changhe.”

Coincidentally, Zhao Changhe’s surname matched the name of the Zhao House next to them.

Yue Hongling spoke no more and offered a hand. As she pulled Zhao Changhe up, he felt like he was riding on clouds and soaring above mist. He quickly landed on the back of the horse and sat behind her.

Yue Hongling’s graceful, straight back was just inches in front of Zhao Changhe. He could even pick up a faint fragrance from her body. Zhao Changhe, who had been single his entire life, found it embarrassing to let his imagination run wild. He grabbed the saddle from behind, feeling that the dream world he found himself in this time was much more ridiculous than whatever else he’d experienced, with how detailed it was.

There was conversation; there were smells; there was a valiant heroine, carefree in nature—she was absolutely a real person.

The light snow together with the wind felt when riding on horseback were very cold. As Yue Hongling urged on her horse, the ends of her hair lightly flitted across his cheeks. It was a little ticklish.

Apart from the nightmares where he could do nothing but cut people down, he had never experienced such a level of detail in his past dreams.

The cut left by the saber on his cheek still hurt. He reached out his hand to feel the wound. It was full of blood.

Zhao Changhe looked at the blood on his hand. Suddenly, he had a fearful thought: what if this was not a dream?

His thoughts were in a mess. He did not know what to ask Yue Hongling, so he just remained silent the entire journey.

After traveling a few tens of *li*, vast farmland appeared ahead. It was early winter, and there was no one to be seen in the snow-covered fields. At the end of the farmland was a manor reaching into the distance. The walls of its courtyard were towering, and Zhao Changhe couldn’t even tell how far they stretched. At the center of the road leading to the manor stood a large arch. On it was inscribed in gold, “Luo Family Village.”

Yue Hongling slowed down her horse. Looking at the guard servant in front, she heaved a sigh of relief, “It looks like this village is still in good shape.”

Very quickly, one of the guard servants blocked her path, “Halt, traveler!”

Yue Hongling tugged on the reins, cupping her fists as per etiquette in the *jianghu*, “Would you please inform the Luo Village Lord that Yue Hongling from Luoxia Mountain Village has come to visit?”

Yue Hongling’s voice was not very loud, yet it was like a morning bell or an evening drum, reaching far far away. Zhao Changhe envied her. *This must be her internal force*. It was nothing like him, who had almost received internal injuries from being jolted around on a horse...

Without waiting for the guard servant to respond, laughter broke out from within the manor, “Which wind has blown you here today to our manor, Miss Yue? Truly, your presence brings light to my humble dwelling. Open the gates. Welcome our guests!”

The guard servants hastily opened the large gate in the middle. A middle-aged man with a long beard stepped out, smiling as he met them. “Indeed, your otherworldly beauty is like the red sun at dusk illuminating the clouds. Your praise in the *jianghu* is not without good reason.”

Zhao Changhe groaned, then proceeded to puke his guts out. “*Blerghhhh...*”

Yue Hongling: “...”

Zhao Changhe did not mean to do it. His first time being jolted around on a horse really made him vomit. If anything, he very much approved of the man’s words—Yue Hongling was really very, *very* beautiful.

The middle-aged man’s gaze fell on Zhao Changhe, his eyes questioning. “This person is...”

Yue Hongling coughed dryly and helped Zhao Changhe off the horse. She cupped her fists, saying “Village Lord Luo, it is good to meet you again. I come here today because there are some private matters I wish to report. This person here bears some relation to them...”

Zhao Changhe perked up his ears.

On the second card he had drawn at the fortune telling hut there was a jade pendant that apparently pointed to his starting location. However, with that in mind, he found this place baffling. He could not see what relation it had to the jade pendant. Could it be that the private matter mentioned by Yue Hongling had something to do with that?

1. Attire commonly seen in *wuxia* novels and dramas.

2. One *li* (里) is 500 meters. 里