

Tome of Troubled Times

Chapter 9: Saber

The following morning, Zhao Changhe stared speechlessly at the piece of cornbread sent by one of the laborers. He complained bitterly, "How can this be considered a breakfast? It's worse than the food at the inns."

Luo Qi wanted to say something but stopped. Once Zhao Changhe stopped spewing his nonsense last night, he returned to practicing his horse stance and lunges for an hour. By the end of it, he was exhausted and started snoring the moment he lay on the table. Luo Qi did not sleep very well because of this.

However, Zhao Changhe's effort and dedication were truly remarkable.

Luo Qi did not know if he should laugh at Zhao Changhe for his inability to estimate his own strength, or if he should encourage him. He thus quietly chewed his cornbread before saying, "It's the middle of winter. It's pretty good that we have food to eat in the first place. Do you know how many people were drooling looking at the chicken wing we received for dinner last night?"

Listening to this, Zhao Changhe realized that regardless of whether the pen or sword was king in this world, it was still more or less ancient China. With what production capabilities there were in this period, not even a landlord could have meat for every meal. Moreover, these were troubled times. There were many that could not fill their bellies. The two of them were quite fortunate to be able to have breakfast every morning.

Zhao Changhe grew worried. The nutrition the body required to practice the Vicious Blood Art was no joke. Cornbread was nowhere near enough. Zhao Changhe wondered if there were missions he could complete for rewards.

If it comes down to it, will I have to go robbing innocents?

Zhao Changhe was not just unused to only having a piece of cornbread for breakfast, but also felt that other areas were also problematic.

For instance, there was a waterfall behind the stronghold, which flowed into a pool. The pool forked out into streams. Walking down from the peak, the scenery was quite beautiful. Water for everyday use came from this pool. However, there was none to spare for people to wash their faces or rinse their mouths; it was all for drinking. Not to mention...in this weather, who would go to the pool to bathe?

How am I gonna live like this...

Luo Qi scratched an itch and complained, “I’ve never gone this many days without a bath... What kind of fucking place is this? The living conditions provided by the Luo family were something many people longed for but could not obtain. You just *had* to become a wanted fugitive didn’t you?”

Zhao Changhe sighed. “Why are you bringing this up again...”

Luo Qi tilted his head and ignored Zhao Changhe, but he knew all too well that he was making trouble for no reason. There was no point in blaming Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Changhe felt the same. To go from his lavish modern lifestyle to this shithole—he fully understood Luo Qi’s baseless complaints. If that blind woman were here, Zhao Changhe reckoned he would have slapped her across the face.

Zhao Changhe did not know how other mountain kings went about their days in pleasure. But he knew that they *had* to be mountain kings and not some small fry.

“I’m not going to entertain you. I’m going to train.” Zhao Changhe spoke no more about this and chewed on his cornbread as he headed to the training grounds in the stronghold.

As a complete noob who had never touched martial arts in his life, Zhao Changhe was not going to learn anything merely by looking at secret manuals. He needed someone to dispel his doubts. There were many terms he did not understand, and because Luo Qi practiced different arts from the Blood God Cult, there was no use asking him.

The magnificent branch master, Fang Buping, did not conduct any teaching here. The stronghold had its own instructor to pass down the cult’s martial arts. All Zhao Changhe needed to do was learn from him.

There was no snow today. When Zhao Changhe arrived at the training grounds, there were already many people present. He noticed that everyone trained with sabers.

The instructor’s voice resounded through the training grounds. “It’s easy to hold a saber, but you can’t just randomly hack and slash! How many times do I have to say it? For the Returning Slash, the range of your motion can’t be too wide, or there will be too many openings. You won’t have time to recover your stance. Zhang Quan! Look at your hips. Do you think you’re your mom dancing to folk songs?”

Zhao Changhe looked carefully at Zhang Quan. The slash he made as he turned around was quick and violent. Whoever tried to ambush him from behind would be cut in half. Yet, he was still berated by the instructor.

The instructor snatched away Zhang Quan's saber. "Let me show you how it's done. Look carefully!"

The instructor's legs slightly bent as he stepped lightly and turned his waist. Zhao Changhe could only see a flash as the saber swept through the air, stopping after tracing an exact ninety degree arc behind the instructor himself.

He was clearly faster than Zhang Quan and his blade was steadier. There were no superfluous movements. It was as if there was a wall blocking the saber from moving any further.

The instructor said loudly, "If you want to handle your saber with ease, you can't use up all your strength. Just like with this move. It doesn't matter if it hits the target the way you want, you can only turn the tides of battle if you have strength remaining after that."

So that's how it's done. This makes sense...that's how I died in those dreams.

Even simpler moves required proper form. If Zhao Changhe had known some of these moves back then, even the absolute basics, the ending of those dreams might have been different.

The real reason for entering the dream is to learn these things, I guess?

Zhao Changhe had ended up taking quite the detour to get to this point, but this was the beginning of his martial arts training...even though he'd probably long since strayed from what the blind woman had intended.

Perhaps that's a good thing...

Zhang Quan spoke back, "But instructor, I didn't intend to put so much strength into that attack. This move requires the blade to move extremely quickly, at such speeds I can't bring it back..."

"You must train! Everyday, practice one thousand times how much strength to use, and where to stop your blade for this Returning Slash, then you'll learn how to do it!" Instructor Sun's voice was still very loud. "Other than this, did you all see how I coordinated the strength in my legs and hips? When I tell all of you to hold your horse stance and lunge, you think it's for you all to look cool?!"

"Ah?" Zhang Quan scratched his head. "No. I didn't see clearly. Instructor, could you..."

"Hmm?" Instructor Sun glared at Zhang Quan.

Zhang Quan laughed apologetically and withdrew.

The rest of the disciples spoke among themselves. “Nobody saw it clearly. Instructor, can you demonstrate again...”

Instructor Sun shook his head in disappointment. This was not his first time saying all of this. Each one of these disciples were as dumb as a rock. Whatever they learnt yesterday, they forgot today, and they still had the gall to say they did not manage to see his demonstration clearly.

The instructor looked around to see if anyone understood his comments. His eyes landed on Zhao Changhe who stood a little further away and looked to be thinking about something.

“You there. You’re Zhao Changhe?” Instructor Sun shouted, “What’s with that look? Did you understand?”

“Oh...” Zhao Changhe came back to his senses, hesitating before moving to the front. “Can you give me a saber? I’d like to try.”

Instructor Sun immediately passed the saber over and said, “Raise your head! Straighten your back! Speak louder! You think you can become a true fucking man with that girly voice? You think you’re a scholar who passed the imperial exams?”

Zhao Changhe’s cheeks twitched. “I just joined a demonic cult. Do *you* think I’m a scholar who passed the imperial exams?”

“Fuck! You talk back now?! You haven’t even joined the cult. Now you’re still a... Nevermind.” Instructor Sun wanted to say more but stopped himself and waved his hand dismissively. “In any case, speak louder. Are you hungry or what’s the problem?”

Zhao Changhe said loudly, “Give me a saber. I want to try!”

Instructor Sun passed the saber over, satisfied.

Zhao Changhe: “...”

What kind of person is he?

The saber entered his hands. *Man, this thing feels really fucking light. It must only weigh two or three jin[1]...* This was a regular saber. It was identical to the one Zhao Changhe had stabbed Luo Zhenwu with, and nothing like the broad saber in his previous dreams that weighed a few tens of jin. Zhao Changhe suspected that no such broad saber existed in the real world.

When wielding the broad saber, Zhao Changhe had to use all his strength to swing it around. It was impossible for him to stop the blade where he wished. However, that seemed possible with the saber he had now.

Zhao Changhe recalled Instructor Sun's movements. He lunged and turned around, and the blade whistled through the air as it swooped behind him. He tried to stop the blade where Instructor Sun had stopped his, and he actually ended up in a similar position.

Instructor Sun was amazed. "Impressive understanding! With this comprehension and such a well-built body, how is it that you're only starting your training now? What a pity!"

Zhao Changhe returned the saber and cupped his fists. "Please teach me more, instructor."

"Your hands aren't steady enough. Where you stop your blade isn't quite there either. You need to practice this part... Here..." Instructor Sun directed Zhao Changhe's hands and stopped them at a specific position. "Remember this feeling. Once you've got a feel for it, practice this motion everyday. Practice as much as you can. Only then will you be able to strike with proper speed and steadiness. This is the essence of all martial techniques under heaven!"

"Many thanks, instructor." Zhao Changhe heaved a sigh, and sincerely thanked the instructor.

Instructor Sun cast him a sidelong glance, staring for a while before suddenly shouting at the rest of the people at the training grounds. "What're you all staring at? Train! Learn from Zhao Changhe! Look, this was only his first try and he did better than you. Do you all feel no shame? Your movements disappoint me. None of you will get any food today!"

Groups of people glared at Zhao Changhe with hostility.

Zhao Changhe's mouth twitched. *I was afraid he would say something like that. This is just the first day, and here I go offending all my classmates in one go.*

1. 1 jin is half a kilogram. 📖

Chapter 10: How a Bandit Comes to Be

Zhao Changhe followed Instructor Sun as he took a few steps toward the exit of the training grounds. The instructor asked, "Are you here to ask for advice on the Vicious Blood Art?"

Zhao Changhe nodded. "Yes, instructor. Please give me some pointers."

Instructor Sun looked like he wanted to say something but stopped himself. After a long pause, he said, "The power of the Vicious Blood Art is unparalleled. It's indeed very impressive and is suitable for someone your age... However, it comes with many problems. In the future, you must switch to the Blood God Art to remedy them. Unfortunately, obtaining the Blood God Art is not an easy task. Even for core disciples

that have accomplished great deeds, being allowed to see the full Blood God Art manual is a tall order. If you have the desire to practice the Blood God Art in the future, you must prepare yourself for this.”

Zhao Changhe showed his respects once more. “Many thanks, instructor. I understand.”

Instructor Sun nodded. “Other than this. You cannot just cultivate and ignore combat. I trust that you’ve seen the Tome of Troubled Times yesterday. Our cult leader has broken through one more heavenly layer than Yue Hongling, so why was he defeated? Much of the reason is because he fell short when it came to martial arts. The cult leader has been busy with managing the affairs of the cult these past few years. Maybe he’s been neglecting his training. His recent defeat is not necessarily a bad thing.”

Zhao Changhe coughed dryly and kept quiet. *You can just insult the cult leader like this? Anyway, that’s a good example, makes sense and it’s easy to understand.*

Instructor Sun continued, “We all train the saber here. Do you know why we only train the saber rather than other weapons?”

Zhao Changhe answered without much thought, “It’s because the saber is the quickest weapon to pick up, isn’t it? As long as one has strength, randomly hacking and slashing is bound to count for something. A beginner that’s just picked up a sword definitely cannot display as much ferocity.”

This was the reason that Zhao Changhe refused to swap the broad saber in his previous dreams for another weapon even though the ground was littered with swords... Even until now, he had never concerned himself with how carefree the sword was. A life where one desired only poetry and to gracefully cut down his foes with his sword—Zhao Changhe wanted none of that. What he needed was a quick way to up his fighting capabilities. Being free and unrestrained could not put food on the table.

“Not bad. Yes, sabers and spears are the easiest weapons to pick up. The sword, on the other hand, is much harder to learn.” said Instructor Sun. “There are many great men in the *jianghu* who have never practiced any internal arts or high-end external arts, but even so, with a saber in hand, they have cleaved through a piece of heaven and earth. The saber is the most universal weapon in the *jianghu*.”

Zhao Changhe thought to himself, *No shit. All the small fries in wuxia series use sabers. It’s very common.*

“The Vicious Blood Art comes with complementary fist techniques, sword techniques, saber techniques, all the trimmings. As for the Vicious Blood Saber Art, it’s unmatched in its ferocity. Since you’ve received the Vicious Blood Art, you have what it takes to learn this saber art. However, you’ve never learned how to use a saber. There’s no rush... This just happens to be a newly built branch. All the fresh recruits are learning

from scratch. Come here to train the fundamentals with them tomorrow. When the time is right, I'll teach you the Vicious Blood Saber."

Zhao Changhe was delighted. "That's great news. I thought I'd have to get this saber art some other way."

"There's no need for that. You've already presented a show of dedication to the cult. What should be yours, *should be yours*. A true man shouldn't need to haggle over every copper coin or bargain all the time. That'd be fucking small-minded."

There was clear discontentment with Branch Master Fang hidden in Instructor Sun's words. Zhao Changhe did not dare say anything, but he secretly felt good about it.

Instructor Sun did not seem like any ordinary instructor. *If we were at the Head Altar of the cult, he'd be an elder? Or maybe a protector?* That was a position just under the direct command of the cult leader. Instructor Sun probably occupied a high position in the branch, at least enough to challenge the branch master.

"Enough of the pleasantries." Instructor Sun had the blunt temperament of a bandit. He spoke nothing superfluous and began teaching. "The Vicious Blood Art does not involve any directing of your qi. It only has techniques to invigorate your blood. The fundamentals of this technique must be paired with practicing fundamental movements. Just following the manual will be enough... You won't comprehend the secret to directing your strength from just reading, though. You must do it like this..."

Zhao Changhe was immersed in the instructor's words. They floated around his ears, and Zhao Changhe felt that he could already visualize the flow of qi and blood in his body. It was like a stream that initially flowed gently, but slowly began to billow and surge.

Before long, Zhao Changhe could feel a burning heat rising up from within him. It was like the fury he felt when he watched his favorite team lose the world cup. His eyes had turned red and his head had felt dizzy. As soon as his boiling blood had rushed to his head, he was ready to smash the television in front of him to pieces.

The strength one can draw out in such a state is extraordinary. It looks like the Vicious Blood Art is supposed to allow me to enter this enraged state on command?

What was even stranger was that the soreness in his legs from practicing the movements in the manual last night seemed to be washed away by a wave of heat coming from some unknown source. At the same time, the wave of heat strengthened Zhao Changhe's flesh and bones. He felt that he could now hold those movements for much longer.

So this is what demonic arts are like...and this is just the beginning. What will it look like if I train this to a high level?

The instructor's voice was now far away.

The atmosphere around Zhao Changhe felt tense. He could hear a clamor eerily similar to the sound of the school cafeteria after the end of classes.

Zhao Changhe slowly opened his eyes.

What the fuck, it really is a cafeteria!

There was a cook pushing a cart over on which stood a cask of rice with corn. There were vegetables mixed inside together with, unexpectedly, some meat. The fragrance of the food wafted over from far away. The disciples at the training grounds all swarmed over with bowls and chopsticks like bees. The cook began giving out the food.

By this time, Zhao Changhe could hear his stomach grumbling. He'd only trained in the Vicious Blood Art for one morning, but he felt as if he hadn't eaten for a week. He raced to his room to grab a bowl.

Luo Qi was nowhere to be seen, but Zhao Changhe did not care. He took his bowl and rushed back to receive his food.

This bandit nest of a mountain stronghold was, at the end of the day, still a branch of a cult. There were rules to follow. The scene of people chaotically pushing each other that Zhao Changhe imagined did not come to fruition. All the disciples lined up properly. Zhao Changhe was used to sticking his head out while queuing to check things out. He realized that the cook paid particular attention to who he was giving the food out to. For some people, there was not a single shred of meat in their bowls, while others, like Zhang Quan, were given a small piece of red braised pork.

The others looked at the meat in their bowls with envious eyes, but they did not show their temper to the cook. Perhaps Instructor Sun was in charge of meting out rewards and punishments. Whoever he permitted to eat meat could eat meat.

After a long while, Zhao Changhe finally reached the front of the queue. The cook cast him a glance and gave him a piece of red braised pork. It was even larger than the one Zhang Quan received. Zhao Changhe was ecstatic. Instructor Sun indeed treated him pretty well. Right now, to be able to eat meat was incredibly important to Zhao Changhe!

With his bowl in his hands, Zhao Changhe happily made his way out of the crowd, only to be met by Zhang Quan and a few other people. Their smiles seemed not like smiles.

"Yo. It's a whole piece of meat..."

Zhao Changhe's expression darkened and he furrowed his brow as he said, "There's no need to break the peace like this. Acting like such a moronic villain is quite *low* of you."

“Peace? The hell kinda peace are you talking about?!” Zhang Quan did not understand what Zhao Changhe meant by *low*[1], and laughed coldly. “A little traitor entered the cult by slaying his own family’s young master and obtained the Vicious Blood Art. That was enough even by itself, but you just *had* to suck up to Instructor Sun and now our meat portions are smaller. Where is this *peace* you speak of?”

Zhao Changhe was speechless. “So you’re doing this all for a piece of meat?”

Malice flashed across Zhang Quan’s eyes. *Of course it’s for a piece of meat. What’s so strange about it?*

Pieces of meat, martial arts, all of them are simply resources. If there’s no good reason to take them away from others then you just have to make one. Who cares if you’re a new arrival? We’re all bandits of a demonic sect. Do you think we care about modesty?

Zhang Quan could not be bothered talking to Zhao Changhe anymore. He waved his hand and commanded, “Get him!”

From both directions, the bandits rushed forward. With Zhao Changhe’s hands holding his bowl, how could he fight back? He had received quite a few hits to his back while trying to protect the bowl in his hands for a while. Eventually the food spilled all over the floor.

The people watching by the side all cheered. It looked like such scenes were common here.

Zhao Changhe could faintly hear someone whisper, “This Zhao Changhe has been in the limelight for too long. I don’t like it. This is a beautiful display of strength from Zhang Quan.”

“Instructor Sun seems to treat him pretty well. They were speaking in private by the training grounds... Isn’t Zhang Quan afraid of getting on the bad side of the instructor?”

“What’s there to be afraid of? Anyone with two eyes can see that Branch Master Fang dislikes Zhao Changhe. Just how much special treatment can Instructor Sun show?”

While the people whispered amongst themselves, no one noticed that Zhao Changhe’s eyes were becoming redder and redder, like blood.

That feeling of wanting to smash the television while watching the world cup flared up within Zhao Changhe. Finally, he no longer suppressed it, and he smashed his bowl against the ground. “What makes you people think you can eat if I can’t eat!?”

Peng!

The bowl shattered. Its broken shards mixed together with the food on the floor. Now no one could eat it.

Zhang Quan and his goons were taken aback. "Fuck, this guy is ruthless."

"Ruthless?" Zhao Changhe suddenly turned around. His eyes were filled with crazed rancor. "You think that's all?"

The people were still feeling sorry looking at the wasted food on the floor. Before they could even react, Zhao Changhe rushed toward Zhang Quan in a single step and grabbed his collar.

Zhao Changhe moved with unparalleled swiftness. Even he himself did not know when he had become able to move at such a speed. Hot blood qi surged through his legs as he shot forward like an arrow in flight. When he grabbed Zhang Quan's collar, even Zhao Changhe was stunned at what he had done.

Zhao Changhe did not have time to think about what he was doing. He simply tripped Zhang Quan and flung him to the floor. Then, he grabbed the man's hair and viciously pressed his head against the food on the floor. "You want to eat? I'll let you eat till you're full!"

Thud!

"Aaargh!"

Zhang Quan screamed in pain, and everyone present shivered. This guy was ruthless! There was not just rice on the ground, but also shards from the broken bowl! Zhang Quan's face was completely shredded. If one of the shards poked his eye out...

It was only now that Zhang Quan's lackeys realized what was happening and rushed over. Some of them kicked Zhao Changhe with all their strength, while others tried to pull him away. However, Zhao Changhe simply endured all of their attacks and continued smashing Zhang Quan's head against the floor. Nobody could pull him away.

After Zhang Quan was smashed against the ground four or five times, the people trying to pull Zhao Changhe away carefully released him; the ones kicking him no longer dared to do so. All of them slowly backed off.

Zhang Quan was no longer breathing.

Zhao Changhe was panting as he stood up. His face was expressionless as he looked at them. "What's wrong? Don't you want to eat my food? Don't you want to blame me for being too full? Don't you guys want to eat?"

Zhang Quan's men trembled with fear as they avoided Zhao Changhe's terrifying gaze.

Everyone cleared a path for Zhao Changhe as he walked away.

1. In the raws, Zhao Changhe literally says the English word "low." 赵长河神色沉了下去
· 皱眉道：“不至于这也要伤和气吧· 这种脑残反派有点LOW。” 🗨️