

Tome of Troubled Times

Tome of Troubled Times #Chapter 11: Natural-Born Bandit - Read Tome of Troubled Times Chapter 11: Natural-Born Bandit

Chapter 11: Natural-Born Bandit

After Zhao Changhe left the crowd, he ran to one corner of the stronghold and leaned against the wall panting. It looked like he was about to collapse.

This Vicious Blood Art is truly violent. It wasn't just the speed, but also the fact that not even a bunch of people were able to pull me away. This strength is a little ridiculous. I've only practiced it last night and this morning...

With that said, there was a glaring problem at hand. After just that little confrontation, Zhao Changhe felt simply exhausted. He did not know if it was a result of overworking his qi and blood or if it was because he felt guilty about what he had done.

He had shown off and he had vented his anger. *I don't know if Zhang Quan is alive... My first day here and already I've been involved in infighting. What kind of punishment will I receive?*

When I felt my blood boil and surge through my body, I couldn't give a flying fuck anymore... Perhaps this is one of the symptoms of using the Vicious Blood Art? Or was I just born like this?

"Do you regret what you did?"

From the other side of the corner, Zhao Changhe heard Instructor Sun's voice.

Zhao Changhe turned to look at him. Instructor Sun was standing nearby with his arms crossed, looking at the young man in front of him with a neutral expression.

Zhao Changhe showed respect to Instructor Sun, lowering his head as he said, "No. I don't have any regrets. I will accept any punishment given to me. If I don't stand up for myself, am I supposed to just hand over my food to others like a spineless idiot in the future? I can't accept living like that."

"Ha..." Instructor Sun interrupted him. "Zhao Changhe the Manslayer! I knew you had this kind of spirit in you, not that I needed to point it out. Do you regret learning the

Vicious Blood Art and having to deal with its ability to influence your rational mind? That's what I'm asking."

"Eh..." Zhao Changhe felt some reassurance that what happened just now was the work of Vicious Blood Art rather than him being a cruel person. "For now, I have no regrets. It's a bloody awesome martial art. Nothing can compare to it. Come to think of it, Instructor Sun, is Zhang Quan..."

"He's dead," Instructor Sun answered indifferently. "He dares to steal the piece of meat I gave to you? He challenged you first, then got killed later. What a stupid weakling. His death doesn't matter at all."

Zhao Changhe knew that Instructor Sun had helped him handle most of the aftermath. He looked at the instructor deferentially and said, "Many thanks, instructor..."

"Here come the manners of a man of culture again," Instructor Sun scolded him. "Are you here to pass the imperial examinations or something?"

Zhao Changhe: "...?"

I'm in the wrong for thanking you?

"Just now you tried talking it over with Zhang Quan. Did it have any fucking use? What about now? No one's the least bit afraid of you! But that's how peace is enforced!" Instructor Sun laughed coldly. "I was there when you killed Luo Zhenwu. I saw what kind of courage you had; you're a natural-born bandit! That's why I decided to spare you a few words. When you travel through the *jianghu*, you must never sully the powerful name of our holy faith! Otherwise, why do you think I'm showing you favor? Do you think it's because you have a nice ass!?"

Natural-born bandit... Zhao Changhe was speechless.

Indeed, love and hate did not arise for no reason. Everything had two sides to it. Slaying Luo Zhenwu made Branch Master Fang displeased but impressed Instructor Sun.

This type of world, especially with its bandits, was wholly incompatible with the modern man and his civilization. Fortunately, Zhao Changhe was tougher than most to begin with, and he had already killed many people in his prior dreams. He had long since gotten used to the feeling of taking a life. If it was an ordinary student in his position, Zhao Changhe did not know how they would fare.

Zhao Changhe thought for a while and said, "This isn't my home. Some things will require me to act with propriety... If I continue handling every single dispute like this..."

Instructor Sun glared coldly at him for a while. "You're already in the *jianghu*, and you should know what that means. Find me for training in two hours. Starting now, you will

cultivate in the morning and train the saber in the afternoon. Do whatever you want at night.”

Zhao Changhe pursed his lips in silence as he watched Instructor Sun walk away.

This isn't the jianghu I desire.

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Two hours later, Zhao Changhe showed up at the training grounds on time.

Instructor Sun smiled as he looked at him. *This fella looked weak and exhausted a while ago and he didn't even eat anything. He looked like a frozen eggplant, listless and wilted. But he's full of spirit now.*

After Zhao Changhe beat up Zhang Quan's lackeys, he took their food and ate three full bowls. The portions he had were much larger than what he had. After that, without a sliver of regret, he went to take an afternoon nap to rest for a bit.

From a person that was willing to talk things over peacefully and politely, Zhao Changhe was beginning to rapidly turn into a fierce bandit.

People in the *jianghu* tended to change like this. When one was thrown into a vat of ink, it was hard not to be stained black.

Instructor Sun could not help but sigh. “Come here. Let's practice your fundamentals with the rest.”

Out of habit, Zhao Changhe went to line up, walking to the back of the crowd to listen to Instructor Sun. However, the moment the other disciples saw him come over, they all started trembling and cleared a path for him, as if respectfully showing him to the front of the line. Zhao Changhe snorted and walked up. As he stood in front of Instructor Sun, the rest of the disciples reformed the line.

There was a pleased look in Instructor Sun's eyes. He made no comments and began instructing.

“Among all bladed weapons, the saber has the fewest fundamental movements. There is only hacking and slashing and nothing more. The highest-level saber arts are no exception. How well you pick up these fundamentals will determine how far you can go with the saber, how fast you are, how accurate, how steady—all this depends on how well you lay your foundation. No saber art, no matter how good, can be a substitute for poor fundamentals.

“Just like the Returning Slash from this morning. Every saber art that deals with enemies coming from behind consists of this move as a foundation together with some

changes: a different way of directing your strength, a different angle, or a different ending stance. All moves of this category have their different uses, but how accurate and steady you are when you execute them will depend on how well you can learn the fundamentals today. To put it another way, as long as you can get familiar with the basics, it doesn't matter what saber art you pick up in the future, you'll be able to quickly get the hang of it and put it to your own use.

"Many people say that demonic arts give quick results... However, there is no quick result here. There are no shortcuts to learning the fundamentals!"

Instructor Sun looked around the training grounds. Everyone had a look of disappointment in their eyes. *Who doesn't pick up demonic arts for its quick results? If we have to practice our fundamentals everyday, how is this any different from the other sects?*

There were only a few people whose eyes were still glistening. They took the instructor's words to heart.

One of these people was Zhao Changhe.

Instructor Sun laughed. "I will now teach the Chop and Vertical Slash again. Don't think that these moves can be learned by any child that picks up a saber... It's no different from the Returning Slash. This is the proper technique. Observe well!"

Zhao Changhe watched with rapt attention as Instructor Sun demonstrated the movements slowly and found himself following along with his hands. Zhao Changhe had never been this focused when he was studying... *If I was this focused back then, I might have entered Tsinghua or Peking University*[1].

Natural-born bandit?

Maybe.

The scar on Zhao Changhe's face told him that this world suited him far better than Tsinghua and Peking University.

The afternoon passed by quickly and soon it was evening. Zhao Changhe rested on a rock by the training grounds. He was massaging his incredibly sore hands. Once he activated the Vicious Blood Art, the soreness would fade away by itself. It was extremely strange.

Instructor Sun sauntered to Zhao Changhe's side. "You've indeed got a good understanding of things. To be able to learn so much in an afternoon... Go back and rest. You'll have an additional piece of meat for dinner tonight. According to the rules, those who train the best are given a piece of meat. Let's see how many days you can keep this up."

Zhao Changhe was perplexed. "Can we really just train and eat meat? Don't we need to do any odd jobs?"

Instructor Sun looked like he wanted to laugh but kept a straight face. "Teaching you and giving you meat to eat is definitely so that you will be of use to the cult in the future. What? Do you think we're training you for fun?"

Zhao Changhe attempted to ask, "Then..."

Before he could say anything, he was interrupted by Instructor Sun. "That's why you should take this opportunity to train as much as you can. Otherwise, if you die on the job, we can only send someone to bring back your corpse and feed it to the dogs."

Zhao Changhe shut his mouth.

Instructor Sun left leisurely. "You are an accomplished person. You can expect some preferential treatment for now. That friend of yours is already out doing missions. Who knows? Your room may only be occupied by a single person in the future. Extra space is always nice."

Unease clutched at Zhao Changhe's heart.

No wonder Luo Qi wasn't around at noon. He was out on a mission.

Joining a demonic cult was essentially different from becoming a guard servant for the Luo family. *If Luo Qi was dead...I guess he would've been returned by now.*

Zhao Changhe felt the irony of the path he now walked.

Why did he kill Luo Zhenwu? It was true he did it so that he could protect himself, but his main reason for doing so was definitely that he wanted to take revenge for the innocent villagers slaughtered at the Zhao House.

However, the very organization he was a part of now was committing the exact same atrocities as Luo Zhenwu. For all he knew, he would have to personally slaughter an innocent village in the future.

It was natural to think that the way the Luo family conducted itself was despicable and not much different from a demonic cult, but there were still some differences. The biggest distinction was that the Luo family did not rely on committing such heinous acts to put food on their plates. But for demonic cults, this was a part of their bread and butter.

With that said...did Zhao Changhe have a choice? He had been forced to do what he had to do back then. Could he turn back now?

Zhao Changhe lowered his head and looked at the food in his bowl. His eyes were gloomy; he felt them throb.

Am I a natural-born bandit...

'I hope that, in the future, you shall be just as pure-hearted as you are today. And when we next meet in the jianghu, I hope to hear you call me big sister again.'

Zhao Changhe looked to the sky, lost in thought. Those golden words from yesterday had disappeared. It was as if they had never existed.

1. Tsinghua University and Peking University are the top two universities in China. 🇨🇳

Chapter 12: Unwilling to Abandon

"Let's return." On a small path by the mountain, Luo Qi waved his hands.

The ice and snow whizzed past the mountain. It was much colder than inside the stronghold. At least inside, there were many places that shielded people from the wind and allowed them to keep themselves warm. Going outside to complete missions, on the other hand, required them to weather the biting cold.

Luo Qi acted as leader of a small group. They hid by the side of the road, waiting to ambush any traveling merchants that passed by. However, just how many merchants would be on the road in this freezing weather? There was not a soul to be spotted for the entire day. The snow had long since covered Luo Qi's head and shoulders. His slim figure looked like a frozen eggplant.

When Luo Qi left the Luo family, he had no time to bring any other items along. He only had the thin clothes he was wearing. Even with whatever cultivation level he had achieved, it was still difficult to endure the conditions outside.

On the other hand, Luo Qi's men all wore thick clothing; they fared better than him out here. Unfortunately, Luo Qi had assumed a leading position the moment he had arrived at the stronghold, so he could not, in good faith, take any of his underling's clothes for himself. He had put up with this for a while.

One of the underlings by his side said, "Captain Luo, there's nothing to find here. Looks like we should head to the city after all..." Luo Qi shook his head and said, "We'll come back here for two more days. I don't know if the higher-ups want us to preach in the city. There will be people willing to join, but we cannot act rashly by ourselves."

Preaching and looting were the two usual sources of income for a demonic cult. If done well, there was the possibility of setting up industry. The new Beimang branch was just built and had nothing. Even now, everyone was still eating food gathered from the mountain to save up money.

The underling said, "We've been starving for the whole day! If we return to the stronghold, we'll be reprimanded. There's a high chance they won't give us anything to eat. At this rate, we'll all starve to death."

Luo Qi said, "I'll personally treat all of you to a meal someday when we sneak into the city."

Luo Qi's men all smiled. *This newly promoted leader sure knows how to treat his subordinates!* Everyone felt less anxious.

Luo Qi dismissed his men and slowly dragged his tired self back to the mountain stronghold as the sun set. As he passed by the sacrificial altar, with the secret entrance well-obscured, he chuckled coldly.

He knew what it was.

Zhao Changhe thought Luo Qi had no choice but to follow him. However, that was not the case—Luo Qi did not tag along because he was too weak to escape elsewhere, much less because he wanted to exact justice upon the Blood God Cult. In fact, he could have easily ran away, so why did he insist on enduring all this hardship?

It was because Luo Qi knew what this place was, what the Blood God Cult was doing here, and...why they had exterminated the Luo family. He had decided to follow Zhao Changhe not out of necessity, but after careful deliberation.

Luo Qi returned to the stronghold as if nothing was wrong. When he went to report to the mission hall that he had returned with nothing, he was naturally hurled a torrent of abuse. As expected, he was not given anything to eat. Luo Qi laughed apologetically and left, slowly returning to his living quarters.

From afar, he could see the wooden hut. Zhao Changhe stood by the entrance and was using the light from the setting sun to read.

In the face of hardship, whether it's day or night, he continues his training. He's got the look of a diligent student.

Zhao Changhe was holding the horse stance. He had a book in his left hand, and with his right hand, he was repeatedly swinging a saber.

In front of him was a wooden pole. He was trying, with great effort, to make sure the saber hit the same spot every time. The pole, however, was messily hacked up, filled with blade marks.

Luo Qi had never seen someone so hardworking...not that he had met very many people anyway.

Zhao Changhe's face revealed pleasant surprise as he saw Luo Qi return. "You're back?"

Luo Qi found his expression very odd. "What're you so excited for?"

"Oh... I was afraid you met with some danger." Zhao Changhe smiled and said, "Looks like nothing happened? That's good. Have you eaten?"

Luo Qi had an even more perplexed look in his eyes, only replying after a good while. "I've eaten."

In reality, Luo Qi had not eaten anything other than the cornbread given to them this morning. As the words left his mouth, his stomach followed up with a grumble.

In an instant, Luo Qi's face reddened. He glared angrily at Zhao Changhe.

Zhao Chang did not want to bicker with a damn *tsundere*. He turned around and entered the hut. "I was worried you might not have been able to find any food today in this weather, so I left some for you... You came back at a good time. The food is still warm."

Luo Qi followed Zhao Changhe inside as if he was in a dream. He looked at the leftover food on the table, stupefied.

Looking at Luo Qi's surprised face, Zhao Changhe's own expression turned serious. "You won't mind if I've eaten some of it, will you? Just put up with it, my senior martial brother."

Luo Qi kept quiet and silently sat by the table. He looked at the food. There was even a piece of meat there.

"You... You need this meat more than me," he said with some difficulty.

Zhao Changhe waved his hands indifferently. "I ate three portions for lunch. It's enough. I'm not hungry."

Luo Qi spoke no more. *Who in their right mind thinks that eating lunch means one doesn't have to eat dinner...*

Zhao Changhe sat by the side and accompanied Luo Qi as he ate, asking, "It's the middle of winter. Just how many merchants can there be on the road? How are you supposed to complete this mission?"

"There is the occasional merchant. If there really weren't any..." Luo Qi paused. He looked at Zhao Changhe, feeling a little strange. "Perhaps there'd be many atrocities like what happened at the Zhao House, except this time, we would be the ones to

commit them. Do you really not care at all? Isn't it pretty ironic considering your attitude back at the Luo Family Village?"

Zhao Changhe looked at the setting sun, lost in thought. He said softly, "Before you returned, I was conflicted about this. I thought about it for a bit, and I have some things I want to discuss with you."

Luo Qi asked curiously, "What is it?"

"We had no choice in the past and we could only do as we were told. Now, however, we have a certain level of autonomy." Zhao Changhe's voice turned softer. "For example, can't we select our targets? Such as those similar to the Luo family. After taking care of them, can we not claim that we are carrying out the will of heaven, stealing from the rich to give to the poor? I suspect that this is the source of income for many 'heroes' in the *jianghu*."

Luo Qi's expression brightened and, for a while, he stared at Zhao Changhe as if the latter had three heads. Then, he laughed. "I originally thought you were someone great. How can you be this naïve?"

"Naïve? Perhaps." Zhao Changhe said softly. "But there are some things I don't want to lose."

Luo Qi did not mock him. He lowered his head and poked at the grains of rice in the bowl. "In a den of lions, how can one play around? Whatever you have planned, you won't be able to do it."

Zhao Changhe replied, "If I cannot do as I want now, I just have to become stronger. I've already seen it first-hand today. What a demonic cult recognizes the most is strength. If you're strong, others will revere you. No one will dare to trouble you. It's just like how you're a leader now. At the very least, you have some control over your men. Who knows? Maybe one day you'll become the branch master? When that happens, your word here will be the law."

Zhao Changhe still had something he wanted to say.

As long as we have what it takes to deal with our pursuers, we can just make a break for it. It may be a shitty stronghold, but we can't just slip away whenever we want to.

In a foreign place, surrounded by foreign people, who would show care for others? Zhao Changhe was already labeled a natural-born bandit. It would not be out of the ordinary for him to one day betray the cult.

"Heh..." Luo Qi sighed. Zhao Changhe did not know if his interlocutor had picked up on his unspoken words.

Luo Qi said, "I hope you can retain this conscience and na?vete of yours. Just like what you did for this meal... Thank you."

Zhao Changhe smiled. "It's not easy to say something like that. Are we friends now?"

"Yeah," Luo Qi said gently. "We were already friends before this."

In fact, they were more than just friends. It was not a stretch to say that their fates were now intertwined. Luo Qi had never thought that he would use such words about the relationship between him and another person.

"So does that mean we can sleep together tonight?" Zhao Changhe slammed the table. "What I mean is, how long are we gonna go on with one person sleeping on the bed while the other sleeps on the table? Whatever you say, I'm taking the bed tonight. I'm about to fucking freeze to death here."

"..." Luo Qi was stupefied. "Then just sleep on the bed. Maybe I'll be dead by tomorrow and you won't have to concern yourself with this anymore."

Zhao Changhe said unhappily, "You're not a woman, are you? How can you be this much of a *tsundere*? Female leads dressing up as guys in novels aren't popular with readers nowadays."

Luo Qi unhappily pointed at his Adam's apple. "Mister Zhao, have you gone insane? Do you take everyone you meet to be a woman?"

"The exact opposite! I don't want to have any lovey-dovey relationship with women." Zhao Changhe declared angrily. "I seriously hope you're not a woman. It'd be way more convenient if you were a guy. It'd be *really* troublesome if you were a woman! Can't you act more like a man!?"

Luo Qi's eyes widened. After a while, he broke out in laughter. "Truly... Great words from a great man of the *jianghu*."

"I guess what I'm saying is that I'm a *thick-headed* man. Oh wait, I forgot you don't know what that means [1]" Zhao Changhe was too lazy to think of another word. "I'm a *thick-headed* man. That's just who I am. Got a problem with that? Now that I've said this, if you're a guy, we'll sleep together tonight. If you're a girl, I'll give my ass to Instructor Sun tomorrow morning and beg for another room! Why is sleeping such a fucking hassle!? It's just sleeping!"

Luo Qi continued poking at the food in his bowl with his chopsticks. The piece of meat he was reluctant to eat was now reduced to mush. He muttered inaudibly, "You're really a bandit. How vulgar."

Zhao Changhe did not hear what he said. "What?"

“Nothing.” Luo Qi raised his head. “If we have to sleep together, then we’ll sleep together. I don’t know if you’ll be able to handle it!”

1. The word used for *thick-headed* man is 钢铁直男. This is modern internet slang and refers to someone who can only speak in a direct manner and is not good at talking to women. 直男

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