

Tome of Troubled Times

Chapter 7: Blood God Cult

“What’s that?” Zhao Changhe was feeling a little diffident. *Is this book really that popular? Why does it sound like this is a book that everyone has read? Not even the bible is that well-known. I wonder if this Tome of Troubled Times is popular on whatever web novel app they use.*

Luo Qi rolled his eyes. Before he could answer, the Branch Master said, “The ceremony is over. Everyone may commence their own cultivation. You two, come up.”

Zhao Changhe and Luo Qi shut their mouths as they went around the pool of blood and up the ceremonial altar.

The Branch Master’s attitude was neither cold nor warm. “The two of you are accomplished people. The Cult Leader has instructed me to give the two of you positions in the cult so as to allow the both of you to display your conviction to our holy faith. The Beimang branch is newly built and hasn’t been around for very long. We lack the appropriate manpower in many places. What special skills do you have? I prefer promoting people according to their talents.”

Zhao Changhe had actually seen the branch master before. He was the one that had crippled Luo Zhenwhu, and his name was Fang Buping.

Luo Qi was the first to answer. “I have broken through to the first layer of the Profound Gate.”

Fang Buping had a look of amazement as he sized up Luo Qi. “You reached the first heavenly layer relying only on the techniques of the Luo family’s outer sect?”

Luo Qi replied, “Yes.”

“Impressive. You have talent.” Fang Buping clearly knew more about cultivation than Zhao Changhe. “It’s winter and our branch needs people to go out and procure food. You are qualified to lead a small troop.”

This so-called procuring of food meant looting. Zhao Changhe may or may not have picked up on this point, but Luo Qi understood it fully. There was no visible change in his expression as he cupped his fists. “Thank you for recognising my talents, branch master.”

Luo Qi knew that the accomplished person was Zhao Changhe and not himself, so he snatched the opportunity to show off his strength first in hopes of catching the attention of the branch master. It worked out quite well. At the very least, Luo Qi could now be seen as the leader of a small force rather than just Zhao Changhe's lackey.

Fang Buping saw through Luo Qi's thought process and grinned, refraining from making any comments. His gaze landed on Zhao Changhe. "What about you?"

Zhao Changhe said, "I've never learned any martial arts."

Fang Buping laughed mockingly. "When you stuck that saber into Luo Zhenwu, your movements and your control over your strength were enough for anyone who has handled a weapon before to tell you've never learned any martial arts. So what else are you capable of? Are you literate? Can you count?"

Even though Zhao Changhe felt that he could put food on his plate handling menial tasks with his modern knowledge, this was not what he had come here for.

He took a deep breath and ground his teeth as he said, "On the road, I heard from the others that the martial arts of your holy faith are of a different kind. Many of them do not require one to start training from a young age... Would it be possible for me to join the cult as an official disciple and learn these martial arts?"

Fang Buping's eyes narrowed.

The requirements to inherit the Blood God Art—the strongest martial art of the Blood God Cult—were extremely strict. Not even Branch Master Fang met these requirements. However, joining the cult and learning its other core martial arts was definitely possible.

Unlike Luo Qi, Zhao Changhe had presented a show of dedication to join the cult. He had killed the person the First Seat of the Demon Suppression Bureau was supposed to save right in front of her. The only way forward for someone in Zhao Changhe's position was with the Blood God Cult. It was completely possible for him to be accepted as a core disciple.

The two of them were allowed to enter the altar room because the cult leader had already intended to accept them into the cult. Otherwise, they would not have been allowed inside under any circumstances.

However, Fang Buping was quite displeased.

The one to injure Luo Zhenwu first was none other than Fang Buping himself! His hard work had been snatched away from under his nose by a country boy. Of course, by that time, First Seat Tang had already arrived, so he would not have been able to finish off

Luo Zhenwu anyway. Even so, the branch master felt nothing but dissatisfaction and jealousy as he looked at Zhao Changhe.

The cult leader sent Zhao Changhe to this branch because he did not place much importance on Zhao Changhe. Fang Buping knew that this little pain was not given to him arbitrarily, though. Zhao Changhe was placed under his observation for a few months precisely because the boy was to join the cult...

Fang Buping remained silent for a while before slowly saying, "That applies not just to the martial arts of our Blood God Cult... All martial arts deemed demonic by the outside world can provide quick results. Most of these arts do not require one to begin training from a young age to build a foundation, and can be progressed at a rapid rate. However, there are also many drawbacks.... For example, they may be extremely painful to practice, or it may be very easy to fall into qi deviation."

Zhao Changhe said, "I'm prepared for all that."

Fang Buping laughed coldly. "What use is being prepared? How can you endure such hardship without faith in our God? Who's going to be there when you experience qi deviation? You don't even have a clue about what our Blood God is, so how can you have faith in him?"

Fuck... Zhao Changhe could only respond, "I will learn."

"We are a cult, not a clan. Without faith in our god, you cannot join." Fang Buping smiled, content with himself. "However, we do not leave unrewarded those who have accomplished great deeds... Before you undergo the test to join the cult, I can let you learn one of our lesser arts, the Vicious Blood Art. It is considered the foundation for our other divine arts. Once you join the cult as a disciple, a protector will personally pass you one of our divine arts."

Zhao Changhe wanted to say something but stopped himself. He cupped his hands and said, "Thank you, Branch Master Fang."

Fang Buping gestured for them to be dismissed. "You can leave. For now, you may only stay at the mountain stronghold. You may not enter the altar room without being summoned. However, you can have an extra chicken wing for dinner tonight. Take this as a reward for your accomplishments."

Zhao Changhe: "..."

Fuck you. All I get for accomplishing such a great deed is a lesser art and a fucking chicken wing?

The branch master was not so friendly towards Zhao Changhe. In the future, there would be more for the latter to deal with.

What can I do about it?

It's not like the members of a demonic cult can be any good. I've long since expected the path forward to be thorny. Oh well, at least I have a martial art to practice now.

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Nightfall

In the mountain stronghold, Zhao Changhe and Luo Qi were arranged to live together in a wooden hut and on the same bed.

On the way here, this was also the arrangement when they stayed at roadside inns. However, Luo Qi was constantly upset and kept making a fuss about it, so he never shared a bed with Zhao Changhe. Furthermore, Zhao Changhe always claimed the bed for himself. Luo Qi could only sleep on the table.

Zhao Changhe felt no sympathy for him. *Did anyone ask you to sleep on the table? Brat.*

This evening, Zhao Changhe attempted to pull Luo Qi away from the table. "Since you've stopped making such a stern face and are willing to talk to me, what're you still doing sleeping on the table? Get in bed."

Luo Qi withdrew his hands. Zhao Changhe noticed that no matter how hard he tried, he could not so much as touch this skinny martial brother of his. *I guess the first layer of the Profound Gate is indeed something impressive.*

Zhao Changhe had no choice but to give it up. "What're you being such a *tsundere*[1] for? This isn't your courtyard in the outer sect anymore. There are some things you just have to put up with. Don't tell me you plan to keep sleeping on the table?"

Luo Qi replied coldly, "I'm not used to sleeping with someone else."

Zhao Changhe sneered at him. "What if that someone else is a woman?"

Luo Qi sized him up for a good while and scoffed. "Do you have *any idea* how sinister you look with that scar on your face? If they sent an ugly woman like you to my room, I'd kick you out all the same."

Was there a scar on my face? It had been a while since Zhao Changhe had last faced a mirror, so he was not very clear about what his face looked like now. However, back at the Zhao House, when he was trying to save the child, he was indeed injured. Even until now, he had never tended to the wound. *Well, I guess I have a scar now, huh.*

“A scar is pretty good.” Zhao Changhe responded indifferently. “It can remind me of what I should be doing.”

Luo Qi narrowed his phoenix eyes.

Zhao Changhe crossed his arms and sized up Luo Qi with his phoenix eyes and slim brows, clicking his tongue. “I’m a little unattractive, but if you were a woman, you would look fine... In fact, you don’t even need to be a woman. Dressing like one should suffice.”

Luo Qi furrowed his brows and glared at Zhao Changhe angrily. “Do you think I can’t kill you right now?”

“Eh...” Zhao Changhe had forgotten that he was not teasing a gay friend in the real world, where friends would simply laugh off such jokes. In this world, making such remarks could get you killed. Not to mention that Zhao Changhe was not on very friendly terms with Luo Qi.

Realizing this, Zhao Changhe lost interest in teasing Luo Qi and swapped the topic of conversation. “Fine. You sleep on the bed. Give me the table.”

Luo Qi’s expression was still that of fury, asking curiously, “What’s with the sudden change in attitude? The whole way here, you always took the bed for yourself and never asked me.”

“I didn’t feel like I owed you anything. In fact, the one who saved *you* was *me*. Was I supposed to give in when you acted like a piece of ice? Anyway, it’s all in the past now...”

“You may not have much skill, but you certainly have a rather bad temper.”

“Heh... That makes two of us.” Zhao Changhe motioned for Luo Qi to get on the bed. “You should sleep. I’ll go and read some books...wait, don’t tell me you’re not even willing to sleep in bed because I slept there first? You’re really fucking troublesome.”

Luo Qi: “Read your book.”

The book Zhao Changhe referred to was the manual for the Vicious Blood Art.

Even though the mountain stronghold was established recently, it had all the necessities needed for living. The wooden hut unexpectedly came with oil lamps; while Zhao Changhe found them too dim, he actually had no trouble reading. The Back Eye seemed not only to strengthen his hearing and improve his eyesight, but it also gave him the ability to see in the dark. Zhao Changhe felt there were other hidden abilities for him to discover.

Still, this traditional Chinese was quite tiring to read.

The fact that Fang Buping had casually tossed the manual to Zhao Changhe made it seem like the Vicious Blood Art was not very valuable. Zhao Changhe realized, however, that the surrounding disciples were throwing him some envious looks.

Zhao Changhe did not know if this was because the Vicious Blood Art he received was not bad, or if it was simply because it was a way to cultivate. To normal people, obtaining something like this was very difficult...

It was a shame that Zhao Changhe had not asked for more using his show of dedication.

Zhao Changhe sat by the table lost in thought reading the manual while Luo Qi lay on the bed looking at him.

Looking at Zhao Changhe lost in thought, the corner of Luo Qi's mouth curled upward, and his eyes glowed with schadenfreude. He felt that he should provide some words of comfort.

"There's no need to be so dismayed. The Vicious Blood Art is good enough as it is..." Zhao Changhe asked, "You've heard of it?"

"This martial art is rather well-known. I've indeed heard of it before." Luo Qi answered in a relaxed manner. "It's rumored that only bandits who have rendered meritorious service to the cult can study this martial art to rapidly increase their fighting prowess. It's clear that you can progress very quickly with it. You can also tell from the envious gazes of the other disciples that this Vicious Blood Art is pretty good. In any case, it's probably way better than whatever shitty outer sect internal art I have. Of course, it's something given to bandits. There's a limit to how good it can be."

Zhao Changhe asked, "If it's pretty good, do you want to take a look at it? It's not written anywhere that I can't show this manual to others."

"I didn't know you were so generous." Luo Qi was quite surprised. "This is the fruit of your labor. Are you sure you want to give it away just like that?"

Zhao Changhe sighed. "A demonic cult is not a good place to be... Our fates can be said to be intertwined now. If we don't work together, are we supposed to just let others exploit us? What matters if it's the fruit of *my* labor?"

Luo Qi looked at him for a while, and the schadenfreude slowly vanished from his face. His tone became gentler. "Even though it's not written anywhere that you can't let others read the manual, you can't be certain that the cult isn't testing you. Fang Buping isn't very fond of you. You should be careful not to give others something to threaten you with."

Zhao Changhe scratched his head and did not answer.

Luo Qi continued, “What’s more, I’ve already built a foundation for my own martial arts. This manual is of no use to me. What *is* of use to me, though, might be at the ruins of Luo Family Village. I can only hope the core martial art inherited by members of the Luo family hasn’t been dug out.”

Luo Qi paused, then continued once more. “Yes... If you want this shitty internal art of mine, I won’t be stingy. I’ll just hand it over to you. However, as I said before, you’re too old to learn this sort of orthodox internal art. The Vicious Blood Art is probably more suitable for you.”

Zhao Changhe paid no mind to this “shitty” internal art and continued reading the Vicious Blood Art manual. Indeed, from the foreword, this martial art was very likely one of the most suitable martial arts for someone in Zhao Changhe’s situation.

1. The word he’s using here really is *tsundere*, in the direct Chinese translation (傲娇). However, even though it’s a loanword in a sense, the meaning would be quite apparent even to those who haven’t heard it before. ☞