

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. 📖