

Tome of Troubled Times #Chapter 1: Dreams - Read

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Chapter 1: Dreams

In a university classroom, a professor was giving an enthusiastic lecture on the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period[1].

Suddenly, there came a series of snores, and the professor stopped speaking, looking toward the direction of the sound with a blank face. The students also turned over to look, suppressing their laughter.

At the seat in the corner of the last row, a large youth was sleeping soundly with his head on the desk.

“It’s him again.”

“What’s up with Zhao Changhe these days? Isn’t he an athlete or something? Did he decide to go for broke on that side, or was he just up all night reading the Spring and Autumn Annals?”

One of Zhao Changhe’s roommates replied worriedly, “Not at all, he’s been having nightmares everyday, and he’s waking up in cold sweat in the middle of the night. Sometimes he even screams and wakes us all up.”

“What? Is he possessed or something?”

Listening to the students’ discussion, the professor shook his head. Instead of yelling for Zhao Changhe to wake up, he calmly tapped on the teacher’s desk. “Continue.”

How could Zhao Changhe know that his condition had already worsened to the point where he would no longer just have nightmares at night, but also while dozing off in the classroom...

The muddled clamor of the classroom morphed into a chaotic cacophony in Zhao Changhe’s dream—footsteps, screaming and killing, furious curses, pained shrieks, and the metallic ringing of blades hitting blades all melded together.

Zhao Changhe’s surroundings very quickly turned from blurry to clear. He knew he had once again stepped into the same dream that kept recurring the past few days.

It was always the same medieval *wuxia* scene, only in a different setting, where blood-soaked, melee combat remained a constant.

Zhao Changhe could already feel a familiar weight in his hands: it was a thick and wide saber, about 1.5 meters in length, over 10 centimeters in width. He had to hold the long hilt with both hands because it was simply impossible to lift such a heavy weapon with only one. Even so, wielding it was still incredibly difficult.

In Zhao Changhe's first dream, there had been no such saber. Unarmed and defenseless, he had been chased around, panicking as he ran in a random direction and picked it up from a corpse. From then on, every time Zhao Changhe dreamt, it appeared with him without fail.

Zhao Changhe was not sure if there existed such a saber in real life. He thought that it would be too heavy to be of any long-term use; it was clearly not a conventional weapon. In the middle of a chaotic battle, however, it would be particularly effective... so long as you could wield it, of course.

Swoosh!

The sound of a sharp weapon slicing the air came from the side. Zhao Changhe roared, twisting his waist, using its power to drive the saber in his hands and swing it over.

The saber moved; the wind rose!

The attacker broke out in cold sweat, subconsciously raising his sword to block the saber. The sword snapped with a clang, and the attacker's head was sent flying, leaving only a headless body awkwardly holding a broken blade, its neck gushing with fresh blood.

Like chopping rotten plants!

"Now that's more like it. What kind of sword or dagger can hope to stop this broad saber? Heh..."

The sight of a headless corpse spewing out blood was truly horrific, but Zhao Changhe showed not a trace of that callowness present the first time he saw such a scene. He only complained in his thoughts.

From behind suddenly came a faint wind. Zhao Changhe tensed up; he was already getting goosebumps.

A sharp weapon was coming!

Zhao Changhe subconsciously turned as a dagger noiselessly thrust at him from the right.

The wind carried over a certain fragrance. In the instant the dagger cut the air, a demonic figure was already to the left of Zhao Changhe.

If one were to ask about the fatal flaw of this saber, it would have to be its sluggishness. Zhao Changhe attempted to drag the saber around but was a step too slow. With grace, the dagger streaked across Zhao Changhe's throat. And as an extreme, bone-deep pain flared up, the dream realm shattered.

The last image visible was that of a beautiful and slim figure, her laughter fading away into the distance.

Zhao Changhe exploded in anger, "It's you again, you witch[2]! One day I'll kill you!"

As his words came out, he realized something: if his throat had been slit, how was it possible that he was so full of vigor?

Zhao Changhe opened his eyes, facing a completely quiet classroom. Both the professor and students each looked at him with a perplexed gaze.

The professor was expressionless. "What are you going to do to this witch again? Care to elaborate?"

Zhao Changhe: "..."

If he had to pick between dying of cringe and having his throat slit, he would have picked the latter.

The professor spoke bluntly. "I've tolerated you for a long while now. Stand outside and wake yourself up."

Zhao Changhe left the classroom in silence. But how could he honestly stand outside as punishment? He immediately left. After all, he had never been a rule-abiding student anyway, let alone when he was out of sorts like this.

The psychological toll of being placed in a bloody battlefield every day was palpable; sleeping was more tiring than being awake. If this went on, Zhao Changhe was sure to collapse. Moreover, this dream was incomparably vivid. If he was not hacked to death by a blade, he was ambushed and had his throat slit. There were even deaths due to some unknown AOE attacks. The palpitations and pain felt true to life. The whole ordeal was capable of driving a person insane.

When Zhao Changhe went to see a doctor, they told him he was probably too obsessed with video games or reading novels and suggested that he keep away from the internet, just short of saying he should go for electrotherapy.

However, Zhao Changhe knew that he had already put off playing video games for a long time. What's more, the scenes in his dreams were different from those of the video games he was familiar with. There were also some elements that were similar, but

fantasy *wuxia*—even when it did not just have sabers, spears, swords, and halberds—could not, in any case, let one pilot a Gundam.

What about reading novels then? The novel that Zhao Changhe secretly uploaded on his webnovel app had flopped terribly and he had already flaked for a few months. In fact, he had not even opened the app this past month.

Ordinarily, Zhao Changhe would be getting along nicely with exercising, playing ball, and his activities as a member of the archery club. With such a healthy lifestyle, how had he ended up like this?

Zhao Changhe left the school in low spirits. The Students' Street was desolate during the morning periods, but there were some damn couples skipping classes to take a stroll and get a snack together—the “you take a bite out of this sausage, then I take a bite” kind of getting a snack together. He merely rolled his eyes watching them.

All Zhao Changhe wanted was to stuff a sausage in that witch's mouth.

Actually, lonely wolves did not necessarily lack jealousy... Zhao Changhe's mouth twitched as he avoided looking at those damn couples with their public displays of affection. He suddenly turned around and headed into an alleyway along the Students' Street.

This was a blind alley. Inside were all shop fronts which, at this time, were mostly closed. Zhao Changhe walked to the quiet end of the alley. There was a small shop that was open. At its entrance was a board with the black inscription, “House of Troubled Times,” written in seal script[3]. By the door hung a sign which read, “Fortune Telling. Dream Deciphering.”

This was a small fortune telling hut that had only been open for three days. It was very low-profile, but its reputation was spreading fast.

There was no special reason for this. It was because the shop owner was a woman, and a pretty one at that. A herd of starving animals had been talking about this with infatuated eyes for the past two or three days. The day before, Zhao Changhe had specially come after hearing the news. Of course, his reasons were different from the others; he actually wanted to get his dreams deciphered.

Zhao Changhe sauntered in. The lights were off, making the room appear dim. A short-haired lady sat quietly in a corner, arranging cards on a table with her eyes shut.

The woman wore an ancient warrior's dress, straight out of a *wuxia* drama. Indeed, she was very beautiful, especially with her lightly closed eyes. She was like a tranquil statue. However, as Zhao Changhe continued to look, he felt a sort of mystery and bizarreness.

Could a normal person arrange things with their eyes closed?

“While fortune telling, closing one’s eyes can create a certain feeling. When you’re squatting by yourself in a room tidying up things, why do you need to close your eyes?” Zhao Changhe suddenly asked.

The lady did not raise her head, as if she had been aware of Zhao Changhe’s arrival. “Have you considered that I might be, you know, actually blind?”

“You don’t even have a walking stick. Who’re you trying to fool?”

“I don’t need one,” the woman replied calmly. “But what about you? You said I was crazy yesterday, but you came back today. Have you finally realized that the crazy one is yourself?”

Zhao Changhe said, “That’s because the ‘dream-entering treatment’ you talked about sounded too fake. If you told other people, who wouldn’t call you crazy?”

The woman replied indifferently, “That won’t be necessary. If I *did* tell other people, there’d be many that would warmly invite me to accompany them as they enter their dreams... With that in mind, you can probably figure out by yourself why you don’t have a girlfriend.”

Zhao Changhe had just been slapped in the face, but all he could do was endure it. Who had asked him to reveal so many of his secrets yesterday? He was the one curious to have his dreams deciphered. With unending regret, he straightened his posture, saying, “Who the fuck would want you to enter a dream with them... Come to think of it, how is it that you can say all this with such a blank voice and poker face? Are you some kind of robot?”

The woman said, “When explaining facts, there is no need for any expression or emotion”

Fuck’s sake... Zhao Changhe immediately switched the topic of conversation. “Anyway, fake or not, I’ve come to try it today. What is this ‘dream entering?’”

“When normal people have your sort of lucid dream, where they are in full control over their actions, they can do anything. They can end their dreams however they wish. I’m sure you’ve had this type o’ dream before?”

“Correct.” Zhao Changhe was beginning to feel her choice of words becoming strange. For example, that “o’.” Wouldn’t a normal person use “of”?

The woman continued, “But in these recent dreams of yours, you can control your actions, yet nothing else. And things don’t tend to go as you wish, yes?”

“Correct.”

“You being trapped in a nightmare, endlessly looping through it, is because you have not met the unfulfilled desires within. Once you fulfill them, you can escape.” The woman paused. “So what is the conclusion you wish to achieve? For example.... Defeating an opponent? Slaughtering everyone present? Or do you simply wish to break away from the battlefield? Perhaps you even wish to proclaim yourself hegemon o’ that world? Regardless of the difficulty, it must be something genuine, or else it will be meaningless.”

What sort of outcome do you desire?

In his heart, Zhao Changhe immediately swept past the beautiful silhouette of a woman clothed in black, blurting, “Of course it’d be to kill that witch!”

The woman’s calm expression twitched unnoticeably.

“What? Snakes must die. Is there a problem?”

“Not at all.” The woman collected herself, speaking slowly, “Whatever ending you wish to achieve is your business. I can’t go in and assist you. I can only let you know your objective, what you should do, and how you should end things. That’s all.”

“Since you’re unable to help me, if I still cannot defeat that witch after entering the dream, do I simply send myself to death?”

The woman quietly pushed forth her tidied up cards. “Draw three.”

“What’s this?”

“The first card will give you some special ability in the dream. It will help you fulfill your desire.”

“Pretty strange that you have cheats for this.”

“This is a dream after all; what about it *isn’t* strange?”

“Makes sense... What about the second one?”

“It determines your starting location. It won’t be the most dangerous of places. It’ll allow you to make some preparations.”

“That’s good, that’s good. What about the third one?”

“A clue to help you achieve your objective. For example, her identity, or how to find her.”

Zhao Changhe stared blankly into space before replying in bewilderment, “If you have clues, then why don’t you tell me directly? Why do I still need to draw a card?”

“Because I don’t know what they are. I can only tell you according to the card you draw. You can think of this as divining.”

Zhao Changhe looked at the cards on the table and, without saying anything else, casually picked three from the center.

In fact, until now, Zhao Changhe did not entirely believe the things said by the woman. He was basically just desperate enough to try anything at this point. Even if things did not work out, it was still only 10 yuan. He could just think of it as sending a friend some money for a bucket of chicken.

Zhao Changhe turned over the first card. The picture was of a massive eye. It had a blurred background, resembling the back of a human.

The second card was of a round jade pendant with a dragon carved onto it. The background was dazzling... *Is that the dragon throne in the imperial palace?*

The third card was pitch black, like a pure black curtain. However, a faint gold color penetrated through it, outlining a divine, Buddha-like face. Zhao Changhe could not make out its details.

The woman did not speak for a very long time.

Zhao Changhe was also a little speechless. “What’re you still doing with your eyes closed? Can you see?”

“The first card is none other than the Back Eye.” The woman looked like she finally came back to her senses, speaking slowly. “It can improve your eyesight. But more importantly, it can allow you to see what’s happening behind you.”

She could actually see... Zhao Changhe was at a loss. He suddenly felt that there was something interesting about this.

What Zhao Changhe hated most was being ambushed. Was this not a coincidence? Certainly, the woman may have chosen to explain the card as such after hearing the details of his dream, but the drawing on the card was indeed that of an eye on someone’s back.

Could it be that the drawing of these cards reflected one’s own subconscious?

“Then... The second card concerns the location? What does this jade pendant represent?”

The woman once again kept silent, and after a good while, suddenly answered, “You’ll find out once you’re inside.”

Zhao Changhe: “???”

All of a sudden, the woman reached out her hand and took the Back Eye card. Before Zhao Changhe could even get a good look at what she was doing with her hands, the card was already pressed against his forehead.

The next moment, Zhao Changhe's world started to spin. He disappeared; it was as if he never existed. Even the card with the eye had disappeared. However, the other two still remained on the table.

The woman weighed the final card in her hand, sitting there quietly for a few seconds before quietly muttering to herself. “Who would've thought... He actually managed to draw my identity...”

The woman slowly opened her eyes. They were inky black, like a desolate sky; cold and deathly still.

“You want to kill that witch? Heh... I shall wait for you.”

1. Period of political instability in ancient China starting with the fall of the Tang dynasty in 907 and ending with the founding of the Song dynasty in 979. ㊦

2. 妖女 (lit. monster/demon/alluring lady). Used to refer to a beautiful woman. Here, I translated it as witch, as in, bewitching. ㊦

3. An ancient style of writing Chinese characters. ㊦