

Faraway Wanderers

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by priest

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Farewell to the Imperial Court

Volume One. Freely Travelling the World with Wine in Abundance

Volume Two. After One Stepped Down, Another Would Step Up

Volume Three. She has sewn gold thread on wedding robes for other girls

Final Volume. Gratitude, Resentment, Affection, Hatred

Extras

Farewell to the Imperial Court

Chapter 1 - Tian Chuang

Plum blossoms flourished in the courtyard, falling everywhere on the ground, on the snow that was yet to melt, blending together at first glance. The petals were blown around the yard leisurely by the wind.

Dusk fell like a curtain, and on the eaves the moon was as cold as water.

At the far back of the small courtyard, half hidden by the plum blossom tree was a corner gate, looking like it had been there for a long time. Guarded by two well-built men steeled in armors and weapons, inside the door was a distinctly large space. The veranda was narrow and cramped, towering over a stone-paved path which led into a pitch-black prison. The atmosphere was somber and heavy with the stench of death.

The faint smell of the blossoms was seemingly cut off by the door, unable to reach this place at all.

More guards inside with various weapons stood stock still; the bars of the cells they were protecting as thick as a grown man's arm.

Following the dark, narrow path further inside the prison would be met with three large stone doors with mechanisms inside, each carefully guarded. Behind those doors was completely devoid of mortal life, as if the long path leading here had been the road to the underworld full of wronged souls, lit up by flickering lights that looked like will-o'-wisp.

In the cell at the end of the prison, there was a low male voice saying something, followed by a short silence and ostensibly a tired sigh.

Suddenly, a piercing scream cut through the pitch darkness in the prison, dimming the light for a split second. The scream was terribly ear-splitting, like that of a dying animal, giving any human soul the chills.

One of the two guards outside with their back towards the cell seemed to be fresh blood with his young, inexperienced expressions. He could not help but shiver after hearing the scream, but a glance at his companion showed the other playing deaf, standing as straight as a mountain; so he too recomposed and looked down.

But that scream just got shriller and went on longer, the person kept screaming until their voice gave out and their breath became short, and eventually the scream became moans and sobs, further evidence of their misery.

The newcomer felt continuous goosebumps on his body.

After about an hour¹, the sound finally died down. A short time passed by until a middle-aged man was dragged out by two people, looking half dead. His arms were bare, head lolled to one side, hair sweat-soaked, lips bitten raw, blood foaming at the corner of his mouth, no visible injuries save for the seven major acupuncture points on his stomach and chest, which were stabbed into by deep crimson nails. It looked like a horrifying map.

The young guard couldn't help but follow the man with his eyes until he disappeared behind a stone door.

At that moment, someone behind him said, "Do you have regrets now, having seen that?"

He visibly shook with fear, turning back to see a man in turquoise robes silently appearing behind him for heavens knew how long. The other guard had already knelt, so he quickly followed suit, "My lord."

The man in robes seemed to be in his late twenties, carrying himself with a scholarly grace, but there were traces of sickness on his complexion. His face was sharp, eyes bright, thick eyelashes seemingly hiding half of his face when he looked down, which was a common habit. The rare times the man looked up, a chilling cold in his eyes could be seen. The addition of an elegance slope of nose and a contemptuous curl of lips was a treacherous touch to his handsome look.

The man looked at the younger after noticing the honorifics, smiling gently, "You must be new?"

The young man nodded. "Yes, my lord."

He was then patted twice on the shoulder, "Then you must remember never to call me that from now on, the title is no longer mine. Simply call me Sir Zhou next time."

The young man looked up quickly then down again with respect. "Yes, Sir Zhou."

He nodded, waving his arms, "You two can leave, I want some space for myself."

¹ The original text is a burned out incense, a common time measurement in ancient China.

The two guards obeyed and walked out side by side. The younger one still could not help but look back for a second to see the robed man leaning on the doorframe, his eyes gazing at something in the air but also nothing at the same time. Somehow he thought the man looked like he wanted to leave for somewhere really far away.

After the first iron door was let down, the old guard beside him suddenly spoke in a low voice, “Having seen Sir all amiable and gracious and scholarly, will you believe that he’s the one who put the ‘Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns’ into Old Bi?”

The younger looked at him in shock, and the white-haired old man sighed: “There’re still a lot you don’t understand. If you enter ‘Tian Chuang’ there’s no way out, escape will only result in either death or being completely disabled.”

By Year 4 under the Rong Jia reign of Da Qing, just by hearing the name ‘Tian Chuang’ could make the whole court quiver in fear.

An organization of intelligence gatherers and assassins loyal only to the Emperor, there was no information of their numbers or whereabouts – no doubt their power could extend to the end of the earth. Tian Chuang was formed by Emperor He Lianyi of House Rong back when he was the Crown Prince, and by now it was already fully structured and strictly regulated.

And the first ever leader of Tian Chuang was the man in the turquoise robes, former Lord of Si Ji Holdings: “Sir Zhou” Zhou Zishu.

There were no secrets in Tian Chuang whether it was about court business or peasant problems; therefore one of its rules was that if a person could still talk, they could not leave the organization unless they were dead or asked for the Nails themselves.

The “Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns” punishment meant that the person would be stabbed by poisonous nails into the seven most important acupuncture points on their upper body by internal force,² blocking their Eight Meridians,³ crippling their martial art skills and their ability to speak or move; after three years, the poison would fully spread into their viscera and they would kick the bucket.

They would live their lives without purpose in those three years, and the experience made it worse than death itself.

² 内力 (nèili) The cultivated energy inside a martial artist’s body.

³

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meridian_%28Chinese_medicine%29#Eight_extraordinary_meridians

But even then, there were still some voluntarily wanting to be put in near coma just to leave Tian Chuang.

Those three years for them were the greatest favor.

After dismissing everyone, Zhou Zishu returned to the small cell, closing the door, hands behind his back, pacing around in deep thoughts for a while. Then he stopped at a corner of the room, taking out a small box with the Nails inside. Those terrifying tiny things carried a grim aroma not unlike plum blossoms. Zhou Zishu inhaled deeply, then undid his robes.

He looked relatively well-built, but once the robes were removed, a shriveled body came into view, like something had drained life completely out of it. On his haggard frame were six Nails already being put in for apparently a long time ago, having almost become one with the flesh.

He looked down at his body, smiling at himself mockingly and picking up a knife nearby. Slightly gritting his teeth, he made quick work of cutting away the flesh that clung to the nails as if it's not flesh of his own. His chest was quickly soaked in blood, but the nails looked new again.

Like something was let loose, he cried out in pain, weakly leaning onto the wall in the corner and slowly sliding down, body trembling uncontrollably. His lips were deathly pale, teeth still gritted; then he suddenly convulsed, eyes wide open then slowly closed right after, head twisted to one side.

Blanched and covered in blood, he looked like a corpse.

Only until dawn broke did the man coiled in the corner of the cell twitch. His eyes then opened slowly and he tried to get up, but his weak legs gave out and he fell. He somewhat managed to stand after the second attempt, pulling out a cloth and dipping it in water to wipe away most of the blood on his chest with care. He redressed, picking up a nail to hide in his robes.

Breathing in deeply, he opened the cell door and walked outside.

Leaving the prison to go towards the courtyard with the blossoms and snow, Zhou Zishu felt a relaxing aroma soaking deep into him, cleansing the stench of blood. He stood under the plum blossom tree for a good while, smelling the flowers, unconsciously smiling.

Then he went back to sighing, and spoke lowly, "Anyone here?"

A person clad in black emerged from nowhere, body bent down in waiting for their orders. Zhou Zishu handed them a dull-colored command token and said, "Tell Head Butler Duan to accompany me in meeting His Majesty."

They took the token, then vanished the way they appeared, as if they never existed.

Head Butler Duan Pengju was promoted by Zhou Zishu himself after the latter took over Tian Chuang and operated under his orders only; he was both capable and unabashedly ambitious.

Sometimes, Zhou Zishu saw the younger version of himself in this man.

Quickly enough, he was greeted by Duan Pengju with the token. The latter was confused; since people in the organization rarely revealed themselves, with the exception of their leader they didn't get many chances to see His Majesty.

Zhou Zishu didn't say much, but let him stay for breakfast. "Let's go," he said afterwards, reckoning that the Emperor would hold an early court meeting.

On the way to the palace, though Duan Pengju didn't know exactly what his master's intention was, he followed silently.

The two finally reached the Emperor's study, and as His Majesty He Lianyi was already waiting, he sent them in immediately. After the greetings, Zhou Zishu took out a bamboo tube from his sleeve and presented it to He Lianyi. "Your Majesty, here is the result of the last mission."

He Lianyi took it but was in no hurry to look through, instead he sized up Zhou Zishu, frowning, "You are looking increasingly unwell lately; it is important that you call for the royal physician after this. Do not just rely on your youthful strength and overlook any internal injuries."

Zhou Zishu smiled but didn't nod, only replying, "I am undeserved of Your Majesty's worry."

He Lianyi glanced at Duan Pengju and asked after minutes of surprise, "Why is Pengju here too? It has been a while since I last saw you, still in high spirit I see."

Duan Pengju smiled, eyes narrowed, "It is my great honor that I am still in Your Majesty's thoughts."

He Lianyi sensed that Zhou Zishu had something else to report to him, so he entertained the business with the bamboo tube first, extracting a small note from inside. Skimming through quickly with a smile on his face, he raised his head at Zhou Zishu. "It was perfectly executed. With what do you want to be rewarded this time, Zishu?"

—This was it.

Zhou Zishu suddenly knelt, Duan Pengju in tow since the latter didn't know what else to do.

He Lianyi frowned, "What are you doing?"

Zhou Zishu was almost out of breath, replying softly, "I only dare ask one favor from Your Majesty."

He Lianyi laughed, "No need to kneel. After having risked your life and limb for me; with the exception of this nation, do you really think I wouldn't give you anything of your desire? Just stand up and speak."

Zhou Zishu straightened his back, still kneeling. Then he quietly removed the front layers of thick robes, and the smell of blood was instantly in everyone's face. His recently scabbed wounds were bleeding again, possibly from the rocky horse ride.

"Zishu!" He Lianyi sprung up from his seat.

Duan Pengju was terrified into silence.

Zhou Zishu opened his slender palm, on which a single nail rested. "Your Majesty, I have put in six of them myself. The seventh one will render me unable to take care of royal matters; I hereby come to say farewell, and only ask that Your Majesty lets Pengju carry out my request."

He Lianyi was dumbfounded, words unable to come out. After a long while, he sat back dejectedly, craning up to stare at the beams on the study's ceiling, muttering, "Yun Xing was faraway at the northwest, Beiyuan... Beiyuan is here no more, now even you are leaving me?"

Zhou Zishu stayed silent.

After moments of contemplation, He Lianyi sighed, seemingly said, "I am really alone, aren't I."

Zhou Zishu continued: "Your Majesty needs not to worry about Tian Chuang. Pengju has been assisting me for years, I believe in his capability..."

Duan Pengju interrupted: "My lord! You must not say that, never have I had such intentions... You... You cannot..."

Zhou Zishu whispered, "They are the Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns, I will eventually die after three years. The bow has already been drawn, it won't be stopped——"

He bowed to He Lianyi, refusing to look up even after he's done, "Please take all the years I have been in Your Majesty's servitude into consideration, and have my wish fulfilled."

He Lianyi rigidly stared at the blood-soaked man, and in that moment no one knew what this fair emperor was thinking — the cautiousness, the crafted calculations, the old flames of war, the bitter struggles, all those years... He eventually claimed the throne, but everyone had all passed away, leaving him alone.

No one could escape all the inevitability of this world, or the abandonment of time.

After a long while, he closed his eyes, waving his arm.

The corner of Zhou Zishu's lips raised into a smile, "Thank you, Your Majesty."

He looked like he had come across the funniest tale, sickly pale complexion flushing faintly. With great delight, he turned to Duan Pengju, putting the nails into the latter's palms, "Do it."

Duan Pengju hesitated for a while, then bit his lips, raising the vaguely crimson object and nailing it into his lord's body. After years of witnessing, he knew this process would bring great pain, to the point that even the strongest man would cower and scream; but Zhou Zishu only trembled a little, his body still stiff straight. There was no screaming, only occasional inaudible groans.

And even those groans seemed to contain joy.

Duan Pengju thought his lord must have gone mad.

Zhou Zishu stayed still for a long time, then turned to He Lianyi with his head down, his face as white as paper.

The strength in his body was slowly diminishing, the numbness creeping in. His last words were, "Your Majesty must take care."

Without waiting for an answer from He Lianyi, he walked out of the study, all the baggage over the years now light as feather. His silhouette seemed to flash for a moment, and he vanished without a trace.

Volume One. Freely Travelling the World with Wine in Abundance

Chapter 2 - Chance Encounter

There was a secret about the Nails that no one knew but Zhou Zishu, and from then on this secret might as well be buried with him and a rare few — if all seven had been nailed in at the same time while the person was unwell, even someone with profound strength like Zhou Zishu would only have had one mere breath left to depart from the palace; worse, he would probably become a lifeless lump of flesh before he could even cross the gate.

But if you did one every three months, letting the body adapt to the nails until you couldn't tell them apart on your body — even though death would still be inevitable in three years and there would be an excruciating eighteen months of pain — you would retain at least half of your core strength and could still behave like a completely normal person.

The method was said to drive people crazy with agony; but Zhou Zishu merrily found out that the rumor was unfounded after all. Not only was he still sane, he also felt like there was no other time in his life that he was this happy and at peace.

Those who have left Tian Chuang actually still had their every move monitored; information about who they were, when they left or where they died all recorded in details. The organization was like a giant spider web, from which escape was futile until you drew the last breath.

Fortunately for him, after a life of sacrifice he had gathered quite a few loyal ones.

Zhou Zishu, trained by the Emperor to be a master of all trades for the position of Tian Chuang's leader, was highly skilled in martial arts and disguise; it was impossible to recognize him the moment he joined a crowd.

And so the once most frightening individual in the palace vanished; in his place a free-spirited, miserable-looking wanderer riding a thin horse, gnawing a straw in his mouth while humming folk songs.

He became the first to actually get away from the network just like that.

On his face was a not quite refined mask painted with sickly-colored blotches, so that at first glance he looked like someone on the brink of death. After checking himself out while drinking water from the river bank, he felt this appearance suited his situation all too well, and the more he looked at the disguise the more satisfied he was with it. He conveniently stole a plain set of clothes from a farmer's house by the road, his robes removed and burned, an old flask tied around his waist, half-full with unfiltered rice wine.

Zhou Zishu — after realizing that his name was never once used during all those years perpetually hidden in the dark corners of the palace — gleefully discarded any plans of using an alias and marched on his journey right away.

He also didn't mind what his destination would be. Jiangnan seemed like a good place, so he decided to travel there, maybe do some robbery along the way to help the poor and to simply scrape by. He passed by Kaifeng and Penglai, and after a leisurely three months, finally seeing the colorful scenery of Jiangnan for himself.

He snuck in the most famous tavern's wine cellar right way, trying all the sweet cassia wine and drowning himself in a drunken stupor. He felt elated and floaty, like there was no greater joy in life than this.

Ten days later, after almost getting caught, he came to the conclusion that while the wine was good, its taste had become stale and a bit uninteresting; so he left the place with some silver crumbs⁴ behind.

After those ten days he looked even worse, his appearance wretched and face evidently ill. The emaciation, the wine-reeking clothes and the untamed bird's nest hair completed his beggar look.

Which was why when he was sitting by the roadside sunbathing, a young chubby girl skipped her way around him, holding a copper coin in her palm but not knowing where to drop it in. After brief inspection, she asked, "Hey uncle,⁵ where's your bowl?"

She was immediately taken away by an adult relative, leaving him unsure whether to laugh or cry.

Years have passed, most of his acquaintance gone, some in worry, some dead, some exiled from home. Zhou Zishu leaned onto a wall, stretching his arms and legs, contently bathing under the warm sunlight, humor curled at the corner of his lips. He started to think about what his desire really was after all this time.

⁴ 銀子 (yínzi) A type of currency in ancient China, the standard size for a silver ingot.

⁵ 大叔 (dàshū), a general non-relative term to address older men.

Back when he was still green, he always regarded himself as someone superior, welcoming any praises possible for himself: how smart he was, how cunning⁶ he was, how good he was at martial arts, how knowledgeable; as if not trying to achieve something in his lifetime would be the biggest waste for humanity. But now that he thought of it, what exactly did he want?

And what had he lost?

He had thrown away his freedom to serve royalty in the dark; his life in a never-ending circle, anything he ever owned had to become compensations for the acts he had committed. Now he was just a loner with empty hands, having racked his brain for a triumphant escape plan that put his life at risk. He even thought it was so smart of him to have succeeded.

He suddenly pitied himself, feeling like the most foolish man even in the most foolish world.

How long had it been since he let himself simply bask in the sun by the road like this? It was terribly amusing that the pedestrians walking by in haste seemed to be in an even greater hurry than him – a half dead person.

In a nearby tavern, a bright female voice rung out, “Master,⁷ would you look at that man! If he’s a beggar, why doesn’t he own a mere broken bowl? If he isn’t, then why does he keep sitting there the whole morning doing nothing and smiling foolishly? He must be an idiot, don’t you think?”

Even though Zhou Zishu only retained half of his martial art skills, his hearing was as excellent as ever. The girl was a noisy road away and her voice at a medium volume, but he didn’t miss a single word nonetheless.

Before he could get a chance to silently mock himself, he heard a male voice replying, “He’s just sunbathing.”

The voice was deep, very pleasant to the ears, with every word enunciated slowly and clearly.

Zhou Zishu couldn’t help but raise his head. On the second floor of the tavern facing him were a pretty young lady in purple leaning over the balcony and a man sitting next to her dressed in gray. The latter had a wan complexion, dark eyes

⁶ 心有九窍, literally translated as heart with nine holes, used to describe people with high emotional intelligence.

⁷ 公子 (gōngzǐ), a term used to address young noble men.

seeming like they could swallow all brightness, features very distinct; he actually did not look too human. Zhou Zishu met his eyes the moment he looked up.

The man in gray returned the look before turning his head away with no expressions on his face, his focus back on the food.

Zhou Zishu burst out laughing, thinking about how in this vast sea of strangers, he somehow still found someone who understood.

The girl in purple was still staring at him up and down with her bright eyes. After a good while, she could no longer suppress her curiosity, informing the accompanying man about something then jumping downstairs excitedly, strolling to Zhou Zishu, “Hey mister beggar, how about I treat you to a meal?”

Zhou Zishu regarded her lazily, shaking his head, “I’d rather you bought me wine, charitable young miss.”

The girl laughed gracefully, turning back to her master to shout, “Master, this fool called me a charitable person!”

Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to listen, paying her no attention. The sky could collapse right then and he would still be more concerned about his meal.

She asked again, “Everyone else would have asked for food, what’s so good about wine that makes you crave it this much? Will drinking make you full?”

Seeing that she was very pretty, he couldn’t stop himself from joking around, “Wine can attract beautiful ladies, don’t you know?”

The answer surprised the girl. She then giggled uncontrollably, body shaking with laughter. Zhou Zishu felt like lady luck had smiled on him, as Jiangnan was truly full of beauty. He admired her, sighing, “Dear utmost beautiful one, have pity on this poor old man.⁸ It’s not nice to laugh at people’s misery, young miss.”

Once more she was surprised. “Yah, you’re acting scholarly now too?” She squatted down, untying the wine flask around his waist at lightning speed, running back to the tavern and coming out in just minutes.

Zhou Zishu wanted to take it back but she quickly retracted, smiling, “I’m gonna ask you something. If you get it right, I’ll give this back to you and even invite you for more; if you get it wrong, I’m gonna poison this and leave your belly to rot.”

⁸ Two lines from the poem 代悲白頭翁/The Old Man’s Great Sadness, by Liu Xiyi.

Zhou Zishu laughed helplessly; what a troublesome soul behind a pretty face. He replied, “I won that flask from another old beggar, who knows how many lice are in there. You can take it if you want, I’ll be happier if you do actually.”

She rolled her eyes, giggling, “So all this wine I brought you is for nothing? You make me very angry now, I gotta kill you.”

This little devil, he thought, what a waste of beauty. He complied, “Go on, ask me then.”

“Why are you out here begging if you don’t even have a bowl?”

Zhou Zishu stared at her. “Who said I’m begging for anything? I’m simply sunbathing in this corner.”

The girl startled, unconsciously looking back at the man on the tavern’s second floor. It’s clear that he had exceptional hearing too, but his movements only stilled for a split second after the conversation. With a straight face, he dove back into his food without a care.

“I don’t see why it’s worth it?” She looked up to stare at the sun, a little confused.

Zhou Zishu shook his head, swiftly snatching the flask back when the girl was letting her guard down, making her exclaim and stare at him in bewilderment. This beggar-lookalike man told her, “You’re still young, miss. You have lots of things you want to do, it’s only natural that you will make use of the time to stuff your belly full, to live your life to the best. Me? I’m already one foot in the grave, what else can I do but drinking and sunbathing in await of my doom?”

He downed the flask in one shot, smacking his lips, “Such good wine! Many thanks, young miss!”

On instinct, the girl tried to snatch at Zhou Zishu when he was walking away. She considered her kungfu to be quite competent; but unexpectedly, she didn’t manage to even touch him despite the man looking like he was only an arm’s length away. In no time, the beggar disappeared into the crowd, unable to be seen again.

She was about to chase after him when the man upstairs spoke quietly, “Ah-Xiang,⁹ even if you’re not capable enough, I didn’t know your eyesight’s also that bad. Stop embarrassing yourself further.”

His tone was just above a whisper, no strength to it, and yet it traveled from the second floor, across the crowded street to reach the girl’s ears directly. She seemed

⁹ 阿 (ā) is a prefix of endearment used between people who have a close relationship; the character’s first name is only Xiang.

crestfallen, no longer daring to make any rash decisions in front of her master. She looked back at the pedestrians for a moment before returning to the tavern.

Meanwhile, Zhou Zishu was swaying with his flask on his way toward wherever. Jiangnan was praised to be full of waterways, but while wandering across a small bridge and looking down from there, he found the truth to be a bit of a letdown. Reckoning that no inns would welcome him, he followed along the river bank outside of the city. On the river were small fishing boats which also acted as ferries for passersby.

It was springtime, so the boats were all stuffed full of sightseers. After great difficulty, he finally found a fisherman with his boat docked.

This boat with black sails was right beside other busy ones; it was quite a mystery how unoccupied this one was. On the shore, the fisherman was sprawled out on his back napping, face covered by a straw hat, with only a head of gray hair sticking out. Zhou Zishu went to sit beside him, waiting for the old man to wake up.

But after just minutes, the fisherman was unable to sleep anymore. He yanked the straw hat away from his face, huffing angrily, staring at the younger with great animosity. “Damn it! Don’t you see I’m fucking sleeping?” He cursed.

Zhou Zishu wasn’t at all offended, “Hey old man, wanna do some business?”

The fisherman cursed again, “You little shit, is your mouth for speaking or farting? Speak the fuck up if you want to use the boat!”

He stood up, stretching and swatting at his ass. But when he noticed that Zhou Zishu was still sitting, his anger exploded again. “Are you glued to the ground now?”

Zhou Zishu blinked, suddenly understanding why this one boat was idle compared to others.

He stood up and followed the old man morosely. “Do you have anything to eat? I don’t mind leftover rice,” he asked without shame in between the fisherman’s passionate swearing session.

“A damn reincarnated hungry ghost¹⁰ too, huh,” the other one spat.

He fished out a pie with evident teeth marks on it, throwing at the younger. Zhou Zishu giggled, biting into it without a care while walking onto the boat.

¹⁰ Ghosts of people who have done evil deeds in their life before death; they’re condemned to hell and perpetually starving.

The fisherman started rowing away. “Fuck this,” he stole glances at Zhou Zishu, still fuming.

Chapter 3 - Abandoned Shrine

At this point in life Zhou Zishu was not in the least concerned about anything — he was familiar with courting death, after all; so the fisherman's vulgarity all fell on deaf ears.

The boat calmly sailed across the water. On the other side of the river, a young woman called out melodiously, "Selling water chestnuts! Do you want some?" It was as if time had slowed down with the river flow to a sluggish speed. *Even if I die right here, it'll be worth it*, Zhou Zishu mused.

The idea had crossed him before — back when he was in the middle of climbing the Mountain of Immortals in Penglai. But then he remembered that he hadn't visited Jiangnan and all of its natural beauty; so down south he had gone and again had the thought resurfaced at this place. An unknown emotion surged up inside him. He bit into the dry and hard pie, trying his hardest to chew and swallow. Then he tilted his head side to side in contemplation; he was done travelling through Jiangnan, but there were still the three famous and five sacred mountains¹¹ to see, stopping here would be a great pity.

Because of that, all thoughts about dying here were dropped.

All of a sudden, as if choked on his own saliva, the fisherman stopped swearing. He bent down, head inclined to a vague direction, unblinking.

Zhou Zishu was intrigued, so he stuck his head out from inside the boat's deck to follow the old man's gaze.

He saw him scrutinizing two people walking by the river bank — they were the good-looking man in gray and the pretty young lady in purple he met back at the tavern. The fisherman might be old but he was exceptionally perceptive, and when taking a closer look at him, one could see protruding temples¹² under unruly hair; thick, strong hands and corded muscles. It was very clear there was more to him than met the eye.

The pair whom old man was watching was definitely not ordinary either, seeing that they made him this on guard.

¹¹ Refers to the Three Famous Mountains: Huangshan, Lushan and Yandangshan; and the Five Sacred Mountains: East Great Mountain Taishan, West Great Mountain Huashan, South Great Mountain Hengshan (in Hunan), North Great Hengshan (in Shanxi), and Center Great Mountain Songshan.

¹² It was once believed that men with protruding temples were more careful, perceptive and capable in finance.

The pretty girl was vivacious, but she would walk a few meters¹³ behind the man without fail, never once overstepping her boundary.

A glance was enough for Zhou Zishu to know that this girl was either a maid or a concubine; she might have a bit of a wicked streak with a beauty he greatly appreciated, but at the end she already belonged to someone else, so he stopped thinking too much about it and withdrew his gaze, turning his attention back to tackling the dry hard pie.

It was jianghu¹⁴ after all; ambiguity was one of its staples. If the royal court was a battleground for fame and power, jianghu was a battleground between white and black. Though some were unable to understand this, and took the title of a wandering hero too seriously even until they died.

But how would all this concern an incessantly ravenous homeless man like him anyway?

Zhou Zishu felt somewhat bored after the fisherman had stopped cursing, so he goaded, “Hey old man, this pie lacks a bit of flavor. I don’t mind whether it’s bad or fine salt, so you should’ve at least put some in.”

The other got furious again, “How are you still talking shit with that much food stuffed in your mouth? You greedy little shit, gonna starve you for three days, see how you will complain then...”

The moment he opened his mouth, his words were a never-ending stream. Zhou Zishu smiled, eating his pie with more vigor, feeling a little shameless.

Crossing the river only cost a few coins, but Zhou Zishu threw a silver crumble at the fisherman anyway. The latter didn’t feel grateful or undeserved at all, he took it and walked away, face like that of an unsatisfied debt collector. He couldn’t wait to kick the younger out of the boat the moment they reached the other side, “Get lost, get lost! Don’t waste my time, I have important business to do.”

Zhou Zishu leisurely finished the pie, stretching and leaving the deck. He replied while still chewing, “Do you have to go reincarnate or something, why the rush?”

The fisherman’s eyes were as big as saucers, looking like he want to curse the brat’s entire family and ancestors; but he swallowed his fury once he reminded himself of something, grumblingly sailing away instead.

¹³ Original text was one zhang, a measurement of length. A zhang is about 3.3m.

¹⁴ 江湖 (jiānghú), martial arts world, literally translated rivers and lakes. It refers to the common setting in wuxia/xianxia stories.

It was a good thing that this fisherman act was just a disguise for his whatever business, if he was truly one then he would be piss poor.

Staring at the boat sailing further away from sight, Zhou Zishu deliberately muttered a regard of absolute literary excellence, "Fuck you."

For most of his life he had mingled with the cultured but degenerate side of society; all they did was spouting Confucious this and Confucious that, never did a rude word escape their mouth. He felt incredibly delighted after blurting out that curse, as if years of pent-up frustrations have vanished completely with it.

And to his surprised revelation, cursing turned out to be such an enjoyable thing to do. He was all smiles, whispering once more, "Eat shit bastard, got my money and couldn't even do his job right."

After mulling over the words, he felt like they tasted even sweeter, and that lifted his mood greatly. With content, he walked along the river bank.

Zhou Zishu travelled here and there for the entire day and reached the city's outskirts at nightfall. He found a pond and had a thorough washing, because even he himself couldn't stand the smell anymore, at least he should look like a proper human. He thought about finding a place to stay overnight; and after another few hundred meters on the road, found a dilapidated and abandoned shrine. He made a bed out of hay and fell asleep at the Buddha statue's feet.

In the dead of night, he was devoid of worry and could have slept dreamless till morning, had it not been for the footsteps and human noises nearby.

Three silhouettes appeared at the shrine's door with the apparent smell of blood, prompting Zhou Zishu to open his eyes and frown.

The injured one was wearing a hat, supported by a boy in his teens who had some basic kungfu in him, but the energy of which was still unstable. Like a sick bull, he was in a shortage of breath, helping the injured with strenuous effort. The last person was an old woman dressed like a servant, staggering behind them with a bag in her hold.

The young man walked through the door, scanning the shrine cautiously like a wounded animal. He didn't notice Zhou Zishu as the latter was hidden in the statue's casting shadow, his breath feather light. Turning to the man with the hat, he said quietly, "Uncle Li, let's hide in here for a bit, your wound..."

He didn't get to finish his sentence as the one he was talking to struggled out of his assistance, trying his best to stand and made a salutation at the direction of Zhou Zishu, "Ah... This friend..."

He trailed off after raising his head. Zhou Zishu could see clearly too: this person was the fisherman he met before. On his back was a sword wound, soaking his entire body in crimson. The younger sat up straight, "It's you!"

The fisherman laughed bitterly, "Damn it, of course it's the beggar brat..."

He stumbled forward before he could finish, and the young boy hurriedly went to support him with his arms; but since the latter himself was out of strength, both tumbled to the ground with the boy sobbing, "Uncle Li..."

The fisherman spasmed suddenly. Zhou Zishu couldn't help but walk over to examine the injury, noticing a strange purple color mixed in with the normal redness of blood, the effect of which being his deathly pale lips. He frowned.

The old man tried his hardest to smile and spoke in a low voice, "It's not like you were shitting on your ancestors, boy, would you stop with the tears already? I'm not even dead yet..."

The woman was also wiping her tears, "Old Li, what would our young master do if something happened to you?"

He stared at her, inhaling with great difficulty and told the boy, shaking, "I... am just someone with no future... But I owed your father a long time ago, apart from my own life I have nothing else to pay this debt with..." He coughed and spasmed again right after, "Young man, remember this carefully..."

He didn't get to tell the boy what to remember as more urgent footsteps could be heard outside the shrine. A man clad in black walked in; he didn't even bother to cover his face, on which was a scar from a knife cut. Seeing the three cornered like rats, his mouth twisted. "You did well, being able to escape this far."

The boy bit his lips. He pulled out the sword tied around his hip, throwing himself at the man in black, "I'm gonna kill you!"

It was terribly unfortunate that his astonishing momentum was not backed up with enough skills; no matter how promising he looked, his execution was clumsy and showed his inexperience. He was disarmed with a flick of the hand before he could land a hit, and was knocked back a few meters after a blow to the stomach.

The boy stood up after that, faced covered in grime. Without fear, he shouted and charged again empty-handed.

The fisherman also wanted to stand, but he was so heavily injured that he fell back right away.

The enemy smiled coldly, “Look at this rabbit trying to bite.” He dodged the attack, fingers crooked with the intention of clawing at the middle of the boy’s back. Under the moonlight those fingers didn’t seem to be made out of human flesh and blood, they glowed a faint blue, ready to deliver the killing blow.

Initially Zhou Zishu refrained from sticking his nose into this, but he had somewhat of a fate with this fisherman, having been ‘on the same boat’ with him; and the boy was too young to be met with death at his age. He took a small rock in his palm, but before he could shoot it, there was suddenly a whistle. The man in black flinched and threw himself to the flat ground, making the boy trip in midair since he caught nothing.

At the place where the man in black had stood moments before was a hidden weapon¹⁵ in the shape of a lotus.

They heard a delicate female voice, “What kind of person bullies elders and children this late at night in the middle of nowhere? How audacious.”

Zhou Zishu startled as this voice was quite familiar. He withdrew the small rock, returning to his makeshift bed to watch things unfold silently.

The man in black’s expression twitched, gaze throbbing — Zhou Zishu thought it was because of the scar acting up. His face froze, looking a little funny despite the viciousness. He spoke angrily, “Show yourself, you whore!”

The young lady appeared at the door, smiling. Zhou Zishu recognized her as the one in purple who had threatened to poison him earlier. What a roll he was on today, seeing that half of the people gathered here was someone he had run into beforehand.

The girl’s master was nowhere to be found; she tilted her head, leaning on the door with an innocent expression, a finger lightly scraping her face. “Old shameless bastard, how dare you come here to attack elders and children, not sparing even one who’s at death’s door?”

At being called ‘one who’s at death’s door’, the fisherman, having been swearing up and down vigorously just hours before, collapsed in silence.

¹⁵ 暗器 (ànqì), weapons that are concealed in some way (often hidden in the owner’s clothing). Their effectiveness relies heavily on the element of surprise.

Chapter 4 - The Chivalrous

The man in black and the girl quickly engaged in a fight. As an outsider, Zhou Zishu had a good look at their capability; the movements were not quite the same but the ruthlessness from both was definitely on the same level. They didn't appear to be from righteous orthodox sects.

After about fourteen to fifteen moves, the man suddenly staggered back to dodge, kicking at her Shanzhong point.¹⁶ She leaned away and made a soft noise, concentrating on her next attack which apparently was cracking down on the enemy's knees. But she didn't expect a noise from something hidden above the man's pants; and from it a spring ejected, shooting an arrow forward, aiming at the girl's chin.

She was not half bad, currently having an upper hand in this fight even, but never could she have predicted this vile move; panic piled up but dodging at this point was futile. The rock in Zhou Zishu's hand was finally useful as he flicked it straight toward the incoming arrow, deflecting its course. It ended up narrowly grazing the girl's temple.

After experiencing danger, a normal person would feel terrified; but apparently she was the opposite, her embarrassment turning into anger. She surged forward and made a clawing attack without hesitation, gripping at the enemy's leg bone and twisting it. The man screamed as his leg was broken, but his attacker didn't stop there. In her hand was a glowing blue light, and she ruthlessly pounded it into the man's chest, knocking him backwards, both legs bent and crushed. His face immediately turned gray and purple as he stared at the girl with wide eyes, pointing at her, "You're Pur... Purple..."

He died before he could finish.

The old woman was frightened to death by this beautiful but cruel young lady.

Contrastingly, the simple-minded looking boy had a faster reaction, he threw himself at the fisherman, asking hurriedly, "Uncle Li, how are you? You..."

He still had a breath left in him. With all his strength, he caught the boy's sleeves; the latter tried to embrace him and help him stand. The girl in purple walked over, lifting the old man's eyelids, frowning, "It's the Three Geng¹⁷ Until Death poison, he's beyond saving now. My condolences."

The boy threw her hands off, glowering. He shouted at her, "Stop saying nonsense!"

¹⁶ The acupuncture point in the center of the chest.

¹⁷ A measurement of time, one geng equals two hours.

Her brows raised, murderous intent resurfacing on her smiling expression. But she suppressed it after remembering something, arms crossed in front of her chest with a sneer, “You little puppy can’t even see between good and bad.”

The fisherman only looked at her for brief moment. He scanned over everyone, finally stopping at Zhou Zishu — who was standing at the statue’s feet, two straws sticking out of his head, making a laughable sight of himself. The old man turned to him, about to say something.

Everyone’s gaze followed his. The girl laughed, “Ah! I was just wondering who my benevolent savior was, can’t believe it’s you! I bought you wine, you helped me fight; so we’re even!”

She spoke as if those two things could ever be equal, but Zhou Zishu wouldn’t stoop as low as to argue with a pretty girl. He smiled, walking over to the old man, squatting down, “You calling me, old chap?”

The fisherman said, “I... I’ll return your silver, your boat ride was free, you must help... help me...”

Zhou Zishu didn’t wait for him to continue, shaking his head and reluctantly stood up, but the old man’s grip on his wrist was unwavering, “Help me... bring this child to Tai Hu Holdings of the Zhao family...”

He was nowhere near a beautiful lady, so Zhou Zishu sighed, “Listen, old man...”

He was interrupted. “Small... favor, should... should be repaid with big gratitude...”

Zhou Zishu raised his head, sullenly looking at this shrine in ruins in the middle of nowhere. He thought about the possibility of changing his face again, as this one still didn’t look sickly enough. How else people are thinking he’s that benevolent to agree to these favors?

The fisherman seemed to be in his final moment, his grip ever stronger but his breath faint and weak in his throat. He faltered, “Consider this a way to accumulate your own merits, please! For your descendants... even if you die and have no offspring.... There’s still... your next life...”

Those words hit him like a lightning strike, and the nails on his chest acted up again, as if wanting to sink even further into the flesh. There’s still your next life. Your sins this lifetime will be paid in full with your death in three years, but... but there’s still the next life to look forward to, right?

After a long while, Zhou Zishu sighed, turning over the silver crumble a few times in his palm and putting it back in his breast pocket.

The fisherman's hazy eyes brightened, his lips trembled. Then the light in his eyes slowly dimmed, hand loosening its grip on Zhou Zishu's and hanging down limply. He still seemed to rattle on about something, though.

Zhou Zishu put his ears closer to the elder's mouth, hearing him mutter brokenly, "You must... have to... If you don't... I'll... I'll haunt, haunt eighteen generations... your... ancestors..."

Zhou Zishu sat back, truly at a loss for words as the fisherman drew his last breath, head lolled to one side. Gut-wrenching sobs tore through the young boy's chest.

The old woman in servant clothes also drew a blank as she stood next to him, crying in panic. Zhou Zishu and the girl in purple stood to one side. The girl's big eyes wandered, and her voice was quiet, "Master said you're more than you appear to be, but I didn't really see it before. Which sect are you from? What's your name?"

Zhou Zishu graciously replied, "This incompetent one is Zhou... Zhou Xu, just a lonely vagrant travelling everywhere. Actually, I haven't had the honor of knowing your name, young miss."

She looked him up and down, shaking her head. "If you didn't look like a sick ghost and walk and talk like that, you would sound more like how Master's described. I'm Gu Xiang."

She had never heard of a Zhou Xu before; besides, they only met by chance, there were no reasons to be entirely truthful with each other. But she didn't mind it much, patting the young boy on the shoulder, "Say, he's passed away already, you should get him a proper burial. Are there more people chasing after you?"

Still annoyed by her bluntness earlier, he only glared. The grief and anger brimmed inside him had no way to be relieved, so he directed it all at her as if she was the one who caused the murder.

Gu Xiang raised a brow. This girl had the skills but still not quite the age in addition to the feel of an unorthodox martial artist she exuded. Having enough with the boy taking his anger out on her, she raised her hand with the intention of attack, but catching her off guard was Zhou Zishu's interception.

Gu Xiang felt an ice-cold hand gently wrapped around her wrist. The grip was completely painless and its culprit didn't even seem to have put any strength into it; but she was unable to either move or yank herself away. She couldn't help but give this ill-looking man an astounded look, thinking, Master highly respected this one, but he's even more mysterious than I thought. Not sure I would succeed were I ever to attack him.

Changing her mind as she was a smart one who knew her own limits, she retracted her hands, smirking at Zhou Zishu, “Just doing it out of respect for you.”

Then she turned to the young boy and began scolding, “See, little brat, this sister is only passing by, and she helps you out of pity for your situation; so don’t even look at her like she murdered your entire family or something. Try and avenge him if you want relief that much. How nice of you to only know how to cry over a dead body and bully this good, patient sister!”

This girl might be clever, but she certainly wasn’t kind.

Zhou Zishu, for lack of better options, was about to console him briefly; but to his surprise, the boy after being stupefied by her words suddenly wipe away the tears with all his might and knelt down. He audibly banged his head into the ground twice, voice tiny, “You were right to educate me, miss, I have greatly wronged you.”

He looked a little more sharp-edged with his teeth gritted way too tight, stretching out his face muscles. In contrast, Gu Xiang was dumbfounded, retreating half a step, blinking her large almond eyes, “I- I didn’t say that to make you kneel to me, stand- just stand up, quickly.”

Zhou Zishu bent down a little to help him stand without the boy even noticing. He suggested, “First we should have a burial for... for Old Brother Li. He trusted me to take care of things, so I’m gonna escort you on your journey. But if you two are not in a hurry, you can rest here for a bit and tell me what happened.”

The boy muttered his assent, so Zhou Zishu helped him find a place behind the shrine to bury the old man. Gu Xiang, after observing and finally feeling her heart stirred, brought them a piece of wood, pulling out a dagger around her waist to carve it into a simple headstone. “What’s his name?” she asked.

The boy thought about it for a bit before shaking his head. “He only told us his last name’s Li, and that he owed my father something, so he risked his life to help us escape. I just call him Uncle Li... I don’t really know what his real name was.”

Zhou Zishu exhaled; people in jianghu repay debts and exact vengeance as they see fit; is there ever a need to leave a name?

Gu Xiang had her head down, engraving “For Uncle Li the Chivalrous” on the wooden headstone. She looked it over, giving to Zhou Zishu once satisfied. “What do you think?”

Zhou Zishu saw the word “Uncle” missing a stroke the moment he glanced at it, feeling both amused and sorrowful. He added the missing stroke with his finger before putting it in front of the simple grave.

The young boy knelt down, kowtowing three times while trying to quell down the tears. Then he stood up, his back straight.

Chapter 5 - The Evils

“My last name is Zhang, I’m Zhang Chengling.” The young boy sat down, face dark; but even when his clothes were in tatters, the colors made it clear that they were made from expensive materials and not something a commoner would wear. “Zhou...”

He stopped, unsure how to address this beggar-looking man.

“Just call me uncle.” Zhou Zishu replied blatantly.

Zhang Chengling tried to smile but didn’t really succeed. He lowered his head, looking at the ground inside the shrine that was covered in dust and overgrown with grass, still in a state of shock. The great tragedy came in a blink of an eye without knowledge, and his mind had yet to catch up to what happened.

Gu Xiang whispered, “Zhang Chengling? Sounds kind of familiar.”

Zhou Zishu asked, “Is your father Sir Zhang, lord of Nam He Holdings?”

Gu Xiang blurted out in surprise, “You’re Zhang Yusen’s son?”

Doubt and ‘How on earth does Zhang Yusen have such a useless offspring like this one’ was evidently written on her face.

Zhang Chengling must have seen it too, as his head dropped even lower, hands balled into fists by his side.

Zhou Zishu had to swiftly interrupted Gu Xiang’s spirit crushing session. Having realized earlier that this girl would just say whatever people hated hearing, he coughed, “I hadn’t known, my apologies.”

Gu Xiang started bombarding him with questions. “Your father has quite a reputation, huh... A few days ago when we arrived here, we got to hear about his glory days back when he was younger, and that the family and business recently have been doing really well. People said after getting successful he’s settled here and half detached himself from society, never engaging in any affairs. The holdings were also said to house guests who are pretty decent at martial arts, so no one dared stir up troubles. Who would hunt you down when you have a father like that?”

Her voice carried a flippant attitude since the whole problem didn’t concern her in the slightest. The old woman clearly felt indignant as she stood up, “My lord is the best well-doer you can find, the most honorable, kind-hearted and generous; he will always help people even when he has no idea who they are...”

Gu Xiang only scoffed, tone enigmatic, “Alright alright auntie, we know how good of a father this little one has already. But does this honorable, generous father stop you two from being chased down at late night...”

Zhang Yusen had only reached fifty not long ago, and it was not an exaggeration to deem him someone of virtue and prestige. He had not been doing a lot of jianghu business ever since he started building a family for himself; but if there was ever a grand event, it'd still be obligatory to send him an invitation. Zhou Zishu felt the dead should at least deserve some respect; and while the girl's attitude might be unintentional, it was still ill-mannered of her to have said those things. He cut in, “Just now, who was that person trying to kill you?”

Zhang Chengling went silent for a bit, then spoke under his breath, “He's Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost.”

“What did you say?”

“What did you say?”

Zhou Zishu and Gu Xiang both exclaimed. The former was frowning, and on the latter's face was quaint surprise.

Zhang Chengling repeated with emphasis on every word, “It's Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost, I heard someone calling him that with my own ears...”

He took a deep breath suddenly, as if remembering and realizing something: the blood that night, the smoke and fire, the screaming – they all came back to him at once. He stood up shakily, face pale, whole body twitching, not uttering a single word.

Gu Xiang jerked, pointing at him, “Is he having a seizure?”

Zhou Zishu's face was solemn. He got to the boy, brushing over the acupuncture point that would help him pass out. When Zhang Chengling turned soft and unconscious in his arms, he carefully laid him down. He sighed, “His mind shut down from the memory onslaught. Just let him rest for a while first.”

He turned to the panicked woman, “Is someone plotting against the Zhang family, Aunt?”

Seeing Zhang Chengling in that state, she lost all will. After many tears and snot, she finally recounted the exact events — at midnight, the backyard suddenly caught fire; then came the men in black who appeared out of nowhere, looking like hordes of demons dropping from the sky.

The most terrifying thing was that all the guests, those “masters” who could detect everything from the flick of the grass were unable to fight back and left without anyone knowing.

There was only eccentric Old Li left. He arrived at Suzhou five years ago, always protecting the Zhangs from afar, refusing to enter the holdings — he reasoned that to be able to have the Zhang’s food, you had to be a guest; he was simply someone who came to pay a debt.

It was that eccentricity that had helped save the Zhang bloodline, though just barely.

After a while, Zhou Zishu sighed. “Old Brother Li was a special man among us.” He turned to the woman in tears again; she was only a servant, unable to understand everything. “Do you have any relatives?”

She nodded, “I have a nephew living down south.”

Zhou Zishu gave her a gold ingot. “Take this and go; you’ve been showing your utmost loyalty by following the Zhang’s young master here. Don’t let yourself suffer further at your old age.”

She took the money, biting it by instinct, then smiling in embarrassment once she realized what she did. The tears had stopped, and she told him softly, “Yes, this one is too old now, just gonna a burden for Young Master.”

Practically, staying at a place where a dead body was buried and grass grew everywhere was not really a good idea either, so she left immediately. Zhou Zishu thought that she was just a servant, so it was unlikely that she would be chased after. She showed her gratitude and walked away while he watched her expressionlessly.

It was midnight, so Zhou Zishu knew the prickling pain in his chest right now was the Nails acting up. It was not the kind of pain that mangle your body, or the slow, simmering kind as seen with internal injuries, but one that felt like someone was cutting his meridians apart one by one.

Fortunately, after more than a year of suffering he had well adapted to the pain; nothing showed on his face. He also was still wearing a mask, making it harder for Gu Xiang to see his real expressions.

Zhou Zishu tried to divert his attention by thinking about the girl’s ignorance while discussing Zhang Yusen, asking her, “Is the one with you at the tavern not here today?”

Gu Xiang startled, “How do you know he’s with me?” Then nodded, “Right, you heard us talking, didn’t you — that’s why back when I asked you the question, you answered exactly like my master.”

She pursed her lips, showing disdain at his cheating act.

Zhou Zishu smiled, “Yes, is your master here right now?”

Gu Xiang sat on the incense table¹⁸ with her legs swinging, not touching the ground. She tilted her head, eyes casting downwards, appearing completely innocent. Then she shrugged, “He went to see his old lover.”

Zhou Zishu stared at her doubtfully. She was very pretty, so he had thought she was one of the man’s concubines.

Gu Xiang wrinkled her nose, glaring at him, “Why do you look at me like that? Do you want me to guard outside his window and hear him doing it with another man?”

Zhou Zishu coughed in faint embarrassment, rubbing his nose, “Young miss...”

Gu Xiang looked like a small animal baring its sharp teeth at him. She then turned her head away in thoughts, poking the still asleep Zhang Chengling with the tip of her toes, “Do you believe him? That the man in black was the Hanged Ghost?”

Zhou Zishu hesitated. “...he must have meant the Hanged Ghost from the Ghosts of Qingzhu Ridge...”

Brief mockery colored Gu Xiang’s gaze, “You truly know a lot. How many Hanged Ghosts do you think there are in this world, really?”

Zhou Zishu shook his head. He was about to reply when the pain on his chest attacked, so he had to pretend to be pondering carefully. He said after a while, “Legend has it that in Qingzhu Ridge of Mount Fengya there is a place called the Ghost Valley. In recent years, people guilty of horrible crimes in jianghu and have nowhere else to go have been seeking protection there. But once they enter the Valley, their humanity will be lost, all mortal grudges wiped from their mind. Surviving in the Valley is no easy feat either as one will end up near dead. All in all, the stories are pretty terrifying, so their enemies never speak of them. I heard that Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost used to be an infamous flower thief¹⁹ with a body count of twenty six young people — both males and females — including the closed disciple²⁰ of E Mei Sect’s leader. He was chased after by the six main sects and had no choice but hide in the Ghost Valley of Qingzhu.”

¹⁸ Usually the altar.

¹⁹ A slang used to call sex offenders.

²⁰ The only disciple of a senior in a sect.

Gu Xiang blinked, “Then do you think he’s that disgusting Xue Fang?”

Zhou Zishu laughed. “Xue Fang has made a name for himself for thirty years, he’s the evil of evils. How can he be easily defeated by a young one like you?”

Gu Xiang’s anger was about to flare, but after thinking it over, she came to agree with him, nodding, “True, if it was really the Hanged Ghost that I killed then my ancestors are gonna claw out of their graves — but I have no parents, no idea where the family graves are, so they probably won’t be able to come out. Which means that man is definitely not Hanged Ghost, right?”

Zhou Zishu saw no correlations between people resurrecting and the Hanged Ghost, but seeing the girl deeply pleased with her reasoning, he didn’t have the heart to break it to her. The immense pain still persisted, so he went silent, leaning on one side to rest until morning.

The Nails would always raise hell after midnight, so he made sure to sleep early to gather enough strength when the torment hit. But his schedule was broken today and he was unable to go back to sleep; all he could do now was gritting his teeth and bearing it. The agony only subsided at the peek of sunrise from the east, but by then he felt like he was almost paralyzed.

He attempted to tune his breathing, but suddenly Gu Xiang — who was leaning on the Buddha’s altar dozing off — woke with a start, pretty eyes scanning around. “Someone’s here,” she announced urgently.

Zhou Zishu frowned, he could hear it too. He wanted to stand but only staggered back down. Under Gu Xiang’s look of surprise, he slowly supported himself up by grasping at the table, lowering his voice, “Just numb legs from sitting too long.”

Gu Xiang’s disbelief only deepened with the flimsy excuse.

Morning was when Zhou Zishu was at his weakest, and the quick mediation earlier didn’t help much. But he didn’t want to fight someone right now either, “Get the boy and hide.”

“Hide? Hide where?” Gu Xiang looked at him with her big eyes.

Zhou Zishu was temporarily helpless.

They didn’t get to do anything else as a group of well-trained people with their faces covered barged in through the window, glancing at a sleeping Zhang Chengling and charging forwards. Zhou Zishu, still leaned on the table, saw one with their sword aiming their attack at the young boy. No one saw how what happened as there was

only a fleeting shadow; but then skinny fingers, in the same state of emaciation as the mask on Zhou Zishu's face, were already around the person's throat.

There wasn't even time to cry out before they spasmed and stopped breathing.

The cruel method got the attention of the rest of the group; they had no choice but to halt and take precautions against this sickly looking man who seemed like he couldn't even stand straight.

Gu Xiang secretly stuck her tongue out, jumping down from the incense table to stand behind Zhou Zishu.

He knew at first glance that those people only dressed to intimidate, they couldn't be expendable assassins with all this cautiousness. Had it been Tian Chuang, they would have never hesitated to put the mission first even when their friend's or their own life was on the line. They were definitely not those infamous Ghosts either; the Ghosts could never be this coordinated. Seemed like the Zhang family was specifically targeted.

He leisurely fixed his sleeves as if the rags he was wearing were his old robes hemmed with silver thread. Halfway through, feeling ridiculous himself, he stopped with a smile, "It's way too early to be attacking a defenseless child, isn't it? The least you can do first is say hi."

Chapter 6 - The Beauty

No one made a sound. The group quickly exchanged looks, disregarding Zhang Chengling to slowly circle around Gu Xiang and Zhou Zishu.

Gu Xiang sighed. “What an unfortunate situation. I haven’t done good deeds in forever, and of course the moment I did it troubles came to me. Brother²¹ Zhou, I’m just a frail maiden who has never been attacked by this many before, I’m very afraid, please protect me.”

That last sentence could really scare people to death. Zhou Zishu almost had to struggle to breathe properly, giving Gu Xiang a bothered look while the girl put on her best poker face.

She then stared back at him witheringly.

The group of assassins felt somewhat out of place during this lovingly tender staring contest. It wasn’t clear who issued the order for others to move forward, but in no time, a web-like formation was created, caging the two inside.

Only now did Gu Xiang uttered a soft “Ah,” face stern, interest piqued. The delicate charade was dropped; she ignored Zhou Zishu, pulling out a small dagger, ready to face the oncoming assault.

She had faith in her own capability, but quickly realized the formation was quite a tough one the moment the fight started. There were fourteen enemies, and while it was possible that not all of them would be a match for her, as a whole they had created continuous pressure on all sides, making the situation increasingly perilous. She ended up forced to retreat while fighting, with the formation simultaneously closing in on her, blocking all escapes.

Doubt festered in Gu Xiang as she withdrew next to Zhou Zishu. They stood with their back toward each other; Zhou Zishu’s gaze darkened. He watched their enemies without blinking, telling Gu Xiang, “I’ve underestimated them.”

Gu Xiang couldn’t take it in at first. Her forehead sweated faintly. “What... is this formation?”

²¹ 兄 (xiōng) in this situation is used to address a man with various degrees of familiarity.

Zhou Zishu replied, “I’ve never encountered it before, but it’s said that there exists one called the Formation of Far and Wide,²² its structure is ever-changing and well-coordinated. Every person’s gap can be filled in by others almost immediately and immaculately, creating a barrier through which nothing can pierce...”

Gu Xiang cried out as Zhou Zishu used his bare hand to stop an incoming blade and knocked it away.

“Then what do we do now?”

Zhou Zishu gave her no answer, eyes entirely focused. All of a sudden, he flew up, using the altar as a platform to launch himself further into the air; the dusty table didn’t even budge during the whole process. Three masked men followed him immediately, swords blocking every way out, but Zhou Zishu unexpectedly moved backwards, wriggling through their defense like a fish to reach the Buddha statue.

He made a noise, and with an unknown strength, using his hands to propel the statue forward, mumbling, “Buddha, have mercy and help me this time.”

The stone statue came at the masked men at full force; Gu Xiang immediately stooped down to get out of its way, feeling the wind grazing her hair. The three after Zhou Zishu in midair were not that fast, they didn’t expect this retaliation at all. Facing it head-on was the only option since there was no way to dodge or seek assistance, and naturally they were knocked back, creating a gaping hole in the formation.

Gu Xiang snickered, “Interesting.”

She didn’t let this momentum go to waste, and with a wave of the arm, an arrow shot out from inside her sleeve. The one directly facing her had to bear the brunt of the attack with their face, and they fell back without a sound.

The remained lost all their courage. Gu Xiang’s murderous streak made its appearance again, and she started charging at them without a care.

Zhou Zishu had exhausted all his strength with that move, his yet-to-recover limbs now temporarily numb. He sat calmly on the incense table with no further desire to boast his might.

Gu Xiang only noticed after a good while. She turned to him, tone accusing, “Zhou Xu, what are you doing?”

²² Originally Bahuang Liuhe / The Eight Wastelands and Six Constituents (八荒六合), 八荒 refers to extremely remote areas beyond China; 六合 means the six directions (north, south, east, west, up, down), basically everything in the universe.

Zhou Zishu replied unhurriedly, “Little Sister Gu, I’m just a frail beggar who has never been attacked by this many before, I’m very afraid, please protect me.”

Gu Xiang’s hands shook in anger. Her knife plunged into one’s chest, to the point that it was deeply lodged in their ribcage and unable to be removed.

Gu Xiang was flexible, but not enduring enough in a long fight. She became frantic after having lost her weapon, moving three steps back, trying her best to defend herself. Zhou Zishu, after a fair time to rest, didn’t rejoin the fight right away. He watched them all with a chuckle, picking up a few small rocks. He played with them before abruptly shot one at the forehead of one intending to perform a sneak attack on the girl.

“That’s no good, no good at all; your moves don’t have a structure to it,” he gave her some directions at the same time.

He was as quick as lightning, flicking another stone at one’s Huantiao point²³ to make them lose balance and stumble forward, conveniently right under Gu Xiang’s feet. She instinctively lifted her leg, a reflecting light flashing under her shoe to reveal a tiny blade, which was used to stab the person in the throat. Zhou Zishu continued leisurely, “The foundation is of utmost importance, if your phases are without roots²⁴ and you move without a basis, how can you fully control yourself in a situation?”

Gu Xiang was a smart one. She bent her back to dodge a sword, kicking at the enemy’s leg. Taking advantage of them falling forward to restrain the pulse, she snatched their weapon away afterwards, cracking down on their Baihui point²⁵ to kill them for good.

Another stone was shot at one’s Jianjing point²⁶ while they were in the middle of attacking, making their upper body freeze and fall. Gu Xiang heard the beggar complain equivocally, “No good, still no good, the formation has been broken but that’s not an excuse to take risks, stop underestimating things.”

At those words, the lotus shape created from her feet movements became more lively and flexible. She dodged another one, who by instinct changed their strategy by holding the sword horizontally, exposing a weak spot that Gu Xiang could exploit. She easily took down two more thanks to that.

In no times, bodies littered the ground. The rest of the masked people glanced at each other and retreated, knowing this would not go well if they continued. Zhou

²³ The acupuncture point near the hip joint.

²⁴ Zhou Zishu referred to the five hang – five phases in Chinese philosophy: wood, fire, earth, metal, water; and five gen – five senses: eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body.

²⁵ The acupuncture point at the top middle of the head.

²⁶ The acupuncture point at the highest point of the shoulders.

Zishu frowned; these people were way too troublesome. He did agree to take the boy to this Tai Hu Holdings or wherever, but he wouldn't tolerate the possible hoards of attackers along the way. If he let them go this time, they would just come back later during the journey.

These murderers with ambiguous identity, who tried to eradicate every single person in the boy's family were the true scums of the earth.

A fleeting motion made Gu Xiang dizzy — the person who was just sitting at the table was now at the shrine's door. The masked person nearest to him only had time to slightly lean away before their shoulder was dislodged with a cracking sound. Zhou Zishu had his hand around their throat, twisting it with the gentlest movement; the tip of his toe lifted the victim's fallen weapon at the same time.

On his pallid face was a smile that carried all of the world's demonic energy...

Gu Xiang couldn't keep up with what was happening, and before she knew it, all the remained of the assassin group had become corpses. She blinked in astonishment — this ragged man's ramblings worth diddlysquat, but his execution in battle was one of the cleanest and cruelest she had ever seen. It really made one wonder who he was.

Zhou Zishu was actually not holding on as impressively as she thought, his legs like jelly, body not having enough time to recover ever since he touched the ground again. There was a slight sway to him after he had finished all of them, but he had no intention for Gu Xiang to find out, retreating a few steps as his strength allowed. His walk seemed light as feather, but in reality he was in a miserable state trying his hardest to find something that could support him.

A pair of arms suddenly appeared behind out of nowhere, propping him up firmly. Zhou Zishu startled; he couldn't sense this person coming near at all, feeling his hair stand on end. Fortunately, the person purely wanted to help with no further motives.

Gu Xiang's eyes shone as she exclaimed, "Master!"

Zhou Zishu heaved a sigh of relief at that, straightening. The person behind him was the man in gray he saw back at the tavern, looking around thirty, face undeniably handsome — though his stare would unnerve most people.

Those intense eyes were fixed on Zhou Zishu right now, full of impudence, looking as if they wanted nothing else than to uncover what was beneath the layer of mask on his face.

Zhou Zishu coughed, "Thank you..."

“Wen, Wen Kexing.” The man replied, his expressions riddled with vague doubt. He dragged his eyes down to Zhou Zishu’s neck and hands, suspicion only piling up further.

Even though Zhou Zishu couldn’t detect the man’s intention, he had confidence in his craft. He knew his skills better than anyone; if he failed this simple disguise then he would have perished during a mission years ago. “Ah, thank you, Brother Wen.” He said calmly.

The man tore his gaze away after a good while, nodding, “It’s nothing.”

He strolled into the shrine after that. Gu Xiang was flittering around kicking away the bodies, making a seat for her master from the hay. Wen Kexing glanced at Zhou Zishu once more. “I didn’t mean to do it,” he added, in case the latter misunderstood what happened.

Zhou Zishu instantly recognized where Gu Xiang got her peculiar attitude from. He sat down and began to meditate.

After about two hours, he opened his eyes to Wen Kexing leaning on a wall, legs crossed, still watching him intently. He couldn’t help but ask, “Is there something on my face? Why does Brother Wen keep studying me?”

Wen Kexing asked with a straight face, “Are you wearing a disguise?”

Zhou Zishu tensed, his face betraying nothing, “What do you mean?”

The other paid it no mind, muttering under his breath, “How strange... Really, really strange. I can’t see if you’re wearing a mask or not, can’t be sure that you aren’t, hm...”

He rubbed his chin, sounding uncertain, “I’ve never been wrong before; the moment I saw your butterfly bone,²⁷ I knew you had to be a great beauty.”

Nothing could have prepared Zhou Zishu for that answer.

Wen Kexing nodded, confirming to himself. “I’m definitely not wrong this time, of course you’re wearing a disguise.”

Nothing could have prepared Zhou Zishu for this answer, either.

Wen Kexing didn’t stop staring at him, only giving up after a long period, “Though I can’t see anything on you that would indicate such,” he inclined his head

²⁷ Used to describe the shoulder blades.

backwards, “how good must you be for me to not see through your tricks? Can someone like you really exist? This is really, really, impossible...”

Gu Xiang spoke coldly, “Master, remember last time when you told me a butcher was pretty just by looking at his back?”

Wen Kexing’s voice softened. “He might be a butcher, but those watery, shining eyes of his were enough were enough proof of his charms. People never care about a hero’s background, why can’t that be applied to a butcher too? But what does an uncultured brat like you know anyway.”

Gu Xiang sighed, “Watery, shining eyes? He was just teary from yawning! And apart from that his nose was big, his mouth was big, his head was big, his ears...”

Wen Kexing’s voice left no room for arguments, “Gu Xiang, you are very blind.”

Zhou Zishu had nothing to do but to go check out Zhang Chengling’s well-being.

Chapter 7 - Setting Off

When Zhou Zishu made Zhang Chengling pass out, he did it out of fear that the boy would harbor too many bad thoughts; calming him down was a necessity. There was barely any force to it, so the boy woke up not long after the strange Wen Kexing arrived.

He opened his eyes, dazedly staring at the ceiling as if his soul had left the body. Until yesterday he was still the Zhang's young master, pampered by many — even when his tutor told him that he was utterly stupid and useless, even when his martial art teacher was secretly disappointed that he was just bad mud, unable to plaster walls²⁸ — his life was happy and content.

He got people dressing and feeding him, everywhere he went servants would follow, serving him diligently even with his mediocre studying until late night.²⁹ They would flatter him all day long, and even when Zhang Chengling knew his worth, it didn't stop him from basking in the false praises sometimes. His life went by with such privilege for fourteen years.

Then he lost everything in a single night.

His home was gone, his parents killed along with all relatives and friends, his world turning upside down. He was terrified, but he didn't know what to do.

Zhou Zishu was the type who knew how to fart better than to console people, so he stayed at his place silently. There was only a blank stare on Zhang Chengling's face, tears streaming down from his eyes.

He heard Wen Kexing asking Gu Xiang, "Who's this little thing?"

"He's said to be Zhang Yusen's son."

Wen Kexing nodded with a dull face, like Zhang Yusen's name to him was no more than a fleck of dust. He spoke again a while after, "I heard that the Zhang family was so poor that they had nothing but money, how did a son of Zhang Yusen end up like this? Did he run off without bringing enough silvers or was he lost?"

Gu Xiang lowered her voice, "From what he told us, someone murdered all the Zhangs. The news must have shaken up the whole city by now, but I guess you didn't hear about it while fooling around somewhere."

²⁸ Bad mud that is unable to plaster walls is used to refer to useless people or pointless actions.

²⁹ Literally translated as red-sleeved maiden replenishing incense, referring to the act of scholars being assisted by maids with the incense when they are studying at late night.

Wen Kexing thought for a bit, nodding, “No wonder there were so many corpses.”

He turned to assess Zhou Zishu. “Then what’s he doing here?” He asked Gu Xiang.

The girl scoffed. “That beggar called himself Zhou Xu. He sold himself to a dead man for two silvers, so now he had to escort the boy to Tai Hu.”

Wen Kexing’s eyes widened, internally evaluating something with a completely serious face. He told Gu Xiang afterwards, “Now I’m even more certain that he’s a beauty, only beautiful people can be that dumb.”

Gu Xiang resorted to ignorance, too used to her master’s antics; Zhou Zishu followed suit since he had yet to fully gauge this man’s ability.

He turned to look at a teary Zhang Chengling, feeling somewhat annoyed and wishing that the younger would stop already. He poked him with the tip of his toes, coughing, “Young Master Zhang, get yourself together if you’ve done resting. We shouldn’t stay at this place for long, there must be more people after you to finish off their job. This Uncle Zhou is entrusted, so the least he will do is taking you to Tai Hu safe and sound.”

Zhang Chengling’s eyes shifted to look around. The moment they stopped, he covered his face with his hands and curled up into a ball, wailing. Zhou Zishu felt a headache coming with the boy’s cries; he told himself that a scolding was necessary but didn’t have the heart to do it. Comforting children was not his forte either, so silence was the best option. Then suddenly he sat up, walking toward the door.

He was just intending to check out the state of the Buddha statue and maybe restore it to the original place, reasoning that his previous action seemed quite offensive and wouldn’t help if he wanted to gather more merits. Zhou Zishu didn’t expect Zhang Chengling — who at that moment assumed the elder wanted to abandon him — to scramble forward, rushing to grip at his ankles, shouting, “Uncle Zhou, Uncle Zhou, please don’t... please don’t leave me, I... I...”

He looked extremely pitiful sobbing like that. Even though they ran into each other by pure chance, the younger had no one else to rely on but Zhou Zishu; the latter was his savior, a living Buddha.

Zhou Zishu looked down at him impassively, voice insipid, “Has your father never told you that a true man has gold under his knees?³⁰”

³⁰ A man has gold under his knees means that men must retain their dignity in any situations.

After moments of being starstruck, thanks to those words Zhang Chengling finally reached some kind of comprehension.³¹ He used the sleeves to wipe away the tears and snots with all his might. “Paying respect to the sky, the earth, the king, family and teacher³² is a matter of course.³³ You have saved me Uncle Zhou, will you let me be your disciple?”

Wen Kexing and Gu Xiang observed the scene in amusement, the latter whispering, “Last night he was still a foolish child; he got smart real fast, huh?”

Zhou Zishu could only reply, “Stand up first.”

Zhang Chengling stubbornly refused. “I won’t stand until you accept! If I can’t avenge my family, am I even worth existing? Shifu...³⁴”

Zhou Zishu cared none about his arguments, dragging the younger up by the shoulder. “I’m an invalid who’s gonna die soon. It’s enough of a blessing for me to be able to get by another day, and you think I can teach you anything? I heard that Sir Zhao Jing of Tai Hu is your father’s old friend, go see him and there will be better people to help you with your vengeance.”

He concentrated his internal force into the palms, picking up the statue and putting it back on the altar, muttering “sinful, sinful”. He saluted not quite seriously before turning to speak to a still dumbfounded Zhang Chengling, “We should leave now that you’re fully awake. If you want to avenge your family, we need to get you to Sir Zhao as fast as possible; but now we should get some food first.”

He stretched without a care, smiling at Gu Xiang and ignoring Wen Kexing. He then left the shrine in a blink of an eye, not bothering to check if Zhang Chengling could catch up.

The boy stood in dejection, but hurriedly followed after realizing the man had already gone.

Wen Kexing rubbed his chin, watching the two silhouettes with obvious interest. “Let’s follow them, we’re going to Tai Hu.” He stood up and told Gu Xiang.

The mischievous look on her face vanished. She replied in a low voice after some thoughts, “Master, Zhang Chengling said the Zhang family massacre was done by the Ghosts of Qingzhu, Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost was there.”

Wen Kexing glanced at her with no expressions. “Hm, so?”

³¹ The original phrase used is Good fortune makes one wiser.

³² One of the most important principles for a Confucianist.

³³ Originally 天经地义, literally translated as heaven’s law and earth’s principle.

³⁴ An honorific used by disciples for their masters.

Gu Xiang startled a little, chasing after the already-leaving Wen Kexing, asking him with a serious voice, “The Hanged Ghost was clearly fake since I beat them yesterday. Master... did you know something already?”

“Ah-Xiang.” Wen Kexing stared at her again, his eyes seemingly black holes that could suck people in.

Gu Xiang quieted down immediately, mumbling, “I know, I talked too much.”

At that moment, her face looked pale, as if this ever fearless girl was dreading something. Wen Kexing’s fixed gaze only turned away in approval after the reply as he continued forward. Gu Xiang followed him, keeping a small distance.

She heard Wen Kexing, “We’re gonna follow that Zhou person. My instincts were never wrong, he can’t be anything else but beautiful. We will catch him red-handed eventually; Ah-Xiang, let’s make a bet since you don’t believe me.”

Because of this, Zhou Zishu definitely didn’t have a peaceful journey.

Escorting Zhang Chengling was no different than carrying the biggest fart as there were endless “flies” along the way. He just knocked out another one tonight, regretting his decisions while looking at the two silvers.

He still had half of his strength and his skills didn’t go anywhere, so those people should know better than to touch him. But the Nails made things unpredictable, resulting in his annoyance at the endless torture from both the pain and the flock of scums attacking at every minute — not to mention the pair of master and maid who kept trailing behind them for no reasons.

He could throw them off the track with ease had he not been accompanied a small burden. In addition, the mysterious Wen Kexing had some talent to him; there were many times Zhou Zishu managed to leave him behind only to end up seeing the terribly punch-inviting face just half a day later.

Zhou Zishu quietly dragged another assassin’s body outside before returning to their room to meditate. Zhang Chengling noticed nothing, still deeply asleep with his nonsensical dreams. During the past days they were travelling together, he found out that this boy didn’t display any stuck-up behaviors; the wailing child of before seemed to have disappeared completely, like he was forced into maturity.

He didn’t complain even when they going at a very slow pace, obeying Zhou Zishu’s every word, being generally very honest and sincere; his only shortcoming was the inability to stop calling the elder shifu, no matter how much he had been corrected.

Zhou Zishu eventually gave up, believing that after dropping the boy off in Tai Hu for the Zhaos, he would leave immediately to travel to anywhere he wanted. He had it all planned out already: after seeing the famous mountains and lakes, he would go south rather than north as there was a friend in Nan Jiang to whom he hadn't paid a visit. He had to at least see them and have a drink together before descending to the underworld...

Suddenly, the young man on the bed tossed and turned violently, drenched in sweat. He was like that almost every night; during the day he was calm on the outside with thoughts of vengeance and regaining mental stability, but memories of that fated night had become nightmares, not letting him go. Zhou Zishu sighed, shaking him awake.

Zhang Chengling let out a cry and sat up, eyes blank. He only reacted after a good time had passed, murmuring at Zhou Zishu, "Uncle Zhou... I didn't mean to do that."

He was so young and inexperienced that even his bloodshot eyes retained an innocence that was way too familiar. Zhou Zishu was instantly reminded of someone he knew in the past.

The one who... whose only wish was to wander everywhere in jianghu with him.

He couldn't help but sit there in a daze.

Zhang Chengling spoke cautiously. "Uncle Zhou, I didn't mean to wake you up, I just dreamt of my father..." His lips quivered, pale. "I can... I can stop sleeping if it's a problem?"

Zhou Zishu patted his shoulder, voice unintentionally tender, "It's alright, sleep all you want. I'll wake you if there's a nightmare."

Zhang Chengling made a noise in reply, crawling back under his blanket, fingers still unconsciously holding onto Zhou Zishu's sleeve.

The man stared down at it meaningfully. There was awkwardness in Zhang Chengling's smile when he retracted his hand.

At that moment, from a place seemingly not far away there was someone making a "twang" sound with the strings of their zither. Zhang Chengling felt that sound as if feeling a lightning snapped right next to his ears; even his organs seemed to tremble. Pain started afterwards, and he cried out loud, clutching at his chest desperately—

Chapter 8 - Moonshade

The sound made by the zither was incredibly thin, like a binding spider web coming from every direction, carrying deadly treacherous intentions.

Gu Xiang also felt the insides of her body churning at the sound, but she was quick to assess the situation, immediately forcing herself to calm down.

Wen Kexing who was just sleeping on the bed moments before had already woken, standing by the window silently. Moonlight veiled over his face, softening his features. His eyes didn't blink, staring pointedly at somewhere in the dark.

His shadow stretched long behind him. He remained unmoved, expressions flitting between blankness and mirth, creating the image of a detached but mystifying stone statue. Under the cover of the night, his dangerous aura was set free without restraint.

He looked like a ghost empty of human emotions.

Gu Xiang was smart enough to cover her ears the moment she sensed something abnormal, trying her best to block the sound coming from outside. She sat up straight, finally getting rid of the nausea after minutes of meditation.

Wen Kexing's slender fingers brushed over the window bars, letting out a low laugh, "They even recruited "Enchanted Song" Qin Song... this would definitely cost a fortune. Makes one question who they want to deal with."

In a flash, he heard something dashing through the air — the sound was thick, barely recognizable, like it came from the strings of an old and unused instrument. There was also another person flinging tiny rocks into the endless night sky.

There was almost no sound to the flying objects, but those elusive rocks managed to cut off the never-ending zither's song in such a subtle way; not unlike how one threw a stone into the water, instantly creating ripples that spread to places no one could see or catch.

As expected, the song halted.

Wen Kexing leaned on the window to listen attentively, his eyes closed. The corner of his lips lifted into a smile.

The zither resounded again all of a sudden, the strength carried in the song rivaling floods and giant beasts. Its user seemed to have resorted to the killing move. Practically at the same time, an ear-piercing noise was unleashed from the room next door. It seemed to come from a flute, but normally flutes would never make sounds that sharp, so sharp to the point it felt like they could tear something apart.

A battle broke out between the intense flute and the demonic zither with implausible reflex from both sides.

The zither strings split in a blink of an eye.

The world was plunged into silence afterwards.

Wen Kexing still stood where he was, shaking his head and mumbling, “Our predecessors have never been wrong; it’s inevitable for a swordsman to die by a sword.”

Gu Xiang let out an exhale after everything had passed, wiping the cold sweat on her forehead. “Say, Master, is that Qin... Qin something dead?”

Wen Kexing’s voice was gentle, “Even if he’s still alive, all of his meridians have been broken; he’s useless now. Death would be a happier fate for him.”

He suddenly pushed open the window, speaking to Gu Xiang with an even lower voice than before, as if not wanting to disturb something, “Listen, Ah-Xiang, life will always be fascinating. If you want something, be prepared to pay for its price. Using a zither to kill people is surely fun, but you have to watch out for the ones that can bite back.”

Gu Xiang tilted her head. “When will they bite back?”

Wen Kexing was patient. “When they’re stronger than you.”

The girl nodded, asking again after mulling the thought over, “Why do you have to compete with someone stronger when you can just pick on weaker ones instead?”

He turned his head to look at her. Being backlit by the moon, the man’s whole body seemed to bathe in silver light, his expressions getting harder and harder to read. After a good while, he replied, “Or you can pick on no one and be a good person like me.”

Wen “Good Person” Kexing then left through the window, leaving a speechless Gu Xiang behind staring after him.

Zhou Zishu’s situation was not exactly ideal either. He made this flute during the journey out of boredom with very poor craftsmanship; the notes were not right, the tuning all over the place, so he never got around to using it. He didn’t expect it to be useful tonight. A big crack appeared after a single use; it was fortunate for him to have been able to manipulate the opponent into giving it their all, because only then did he succeed in delivering the killing blow. The results would have been very different otherwise.

Zhang Chengling looked like he had just been fished out of the water. Since the boy wasn't competent enough, even though Zhou Zishu had helped cover his ears, the zither's sounds still left him with internal injuries. His face was as blanched as paper after throwing up.

Zhou Zishu was worried that he was too young and weak to meditate on his own, so he put his palms on the younger's back, lowering his voice, "Concentrate."

Then he used his inner force to assist the boy, only retracted after his complexion looked a little better. His own body was drenched in sweat.

It was a blessing that they were very close to Tai Hu now, he mused, or else he would feel incredibly humiliated for almost not carrying out the mission that he had promised to do. Having never done any good deeds for a large portion of his life, he couldn't fail the very first one; that would probably cause bad luck.

In Jianghu, there was next to no one who possessed as much information as him — Tian Chuang's former leader. He knew exactly who the person he fought was the moment they went head to head.

Legends had it that "Enchanted Song" Qin Song was a eunuch who loved to dress as a woman, the colorful clothes he wore forewarned people of his poisonous nature. Thanks to the fact that he could murder people without a trace, he was very valued. His principle was that the more he was paid, the more loyal he would be to that person.

Since silence had fallen, Zhou Zishu surmised that he was either dead or very close to it. Had he been as powerful as before, he would have finished the other off; but now only half his life was left so there was no certainty of success. Besides, that might be too cruel.

He then heard the sound of clapping outside and someone praising, "How emotionally provoking³⁵ this nighttime melody has been, how would anyone not miss their hometown after listening to it — Brother Zhou has blended the sound of flute and zither beautifully under the moon and stars tonight; this talent, this elegance must belong to a beauty only."

He had never seen anyone talking this much rubbish.

Zhou Zishu thought about how he didn't notice the other standing outside the window at all; someone this unpredictable would be hard to deal with even when he

³⁵ Wen Kexing's words were taken from a line of the poem 塞下曲其一/First Song by the Border, by Li Bai. The line has an imagery of breaking a willow branch, which is often used to describe emotional events such as separation.

was at his best. He could only think of three people and a half who possessed such power; it would be foolish to ever offend any of them.

He inhaled, opening the window, pointing at his sickly face with the deadly pale skin and dull eyes. “This beauty?” He asked.

Wen Kexing choked, glancing at the visage which was not too unpleasant but not something people would want to look at twice, either. He turned to watch the moon after that.

Zhou Zishu lifted his legs to sit on the window sill, following the other’s gaze. The full moon was especially bright tonight; the moonlight was cold like water and the ground looked like it’s covered in mist.

Zhou Zishu wondered who Wen Kexing was among those dangerous three people and a half; on the other hand, he was also unsure about the man’s motives for following him. The confusion only grew the more he thought about it.

He felt a particular aura from this man that suggested they might be birds of a feather, the other would definitely not do something if it didn’t benefit him. He was following another man... or, he actually was following Zhang Chengling to Tai Hu; there must be some kind of plan behind this. After lots of thoughts without any solid conclusions, he scoffed at himself — old habits died hard.

He looked down to Wen Kexing studying him enthusiastically, smiling, “If Brother Wen is really curious, how about making me shed my skin to see the flesh inside?”

Wen Kexing raised his brows. “Fine by me.”

His hands were at Zhou Zishu’s face barely after the word “fine” was uttered. But the latter was prepared, leaning backwards, one leg raised to kick at Wen Kexing’s wrists.

In just seconds, there were so many moves traded back and forth they would make any onlookers dizzy.

Zhou Zishu felt like he was at a disadvantage since his position on the window sill limited lots of movements; he ducked down to dodge another move, jumping down. However, the night was not a good time for him, and in addition to the previous torment, a nail caused intense pain at that moment, making him slow down.

Wen Kexing’s palm was close to his torso out of nowhere, but the man suddenly stopped before he was hit with his strength.

Zhou Zishu looked down to glimpse at the palm that was almost touching his chest, his expression calm as ever. He smiled, “Thank you Brother Wen for having mercy on me.”

He was interrupted by that very palm reaching up to touch his face. Wen Kexing didn't stop there as he slowly caressed with his fingers, seemingly wanting to determine if it was really human skin.

Zhou Zishu didn't get to step back before Gu Xiang — having heard the noises — looked down from the window and pulled her head back inside almost immediately, exclaiming, “Oh my, how rude of me!”

—Correct, exactly what he was also thinking.

Wen Kexing stood very close to him with a serious face — the seriousness turned ambiguous under the moonlight, giving one the impression that he was actually being rude.

Gu Xiang didn't bother to be quiet, “Oh man I'm going blind I'm going blind...”

Zhou Zishu quickly coughed, stepped a long step away, calming himself down. He found this situation both hilarious and embarrassing. “Did Brother Wen see what my face is made of yet?”

“Human skin.” Wen Kexing replied after moments of pensiveness.

Zhou Zishu seemed to agree without thinking.

Wen Kexing stared at his hands. “Strange... How strange, it feels like it's become one with your body.”

Zhou Zishu replied unperturbedly, “It's a shame to admit this, but I'm actually born with it.”

Were there another person observing — excluding Gu Xiang, of course — they would definitely come to the conclusion that one of these two men was a lunatic.

Wen Kexing felt a bit out of his depth, looking at Zhou Zishu one last time before leaving, not to his room but somewhere outside. Gu Xiang stuck her head out again, rolling her eyes while beaming, “Huh, Master must be unable to accept reality at the moment, but he's gonna visit his pretty friend at Gou Lan Bordello. It's good that he's gone, everyone can prepare for sleep now.”

There was a considerable distance between them and Wen Kexing, but without looking back, his voice was still delivered to Gu Xiang directly and clearly through the air.

He said, “What did you just say, Ah-Xiang?”

Gu Xiang gave in, “Just breaking wind!”

Then she quickly went back inside — as if wanting to keep the reply to herself.

Only then did Zhou Zishu exhale, releasing the tension from his body. Gritting his teeth, he leaned onto the wall without making any sounds.

It was fortunate that his pain came in phases and bursts. He waited until feeling a little better to pull himself together before getting back inside.

Tonight seemed to be longer than usual.

Three days later, Zhou Zishu — and a Zhang Chengling who became surprisingly thinner after just a few days — reached Tai Hu.

He knocked on the door, but before he got to explain anything, the butler stared at Zhang Chengling, crying out, “Are you... are you Chengling? Are you really Chengling?”

Then he turned his head to yell at the servants, “Go inform Sir, quickly, Young Master Chengling is here! Young Master Chengling is still alive!”

A short time passed by until Sir Zhao Jing of Tai Hu was at the door to greet them himself. Zhang Chengling fell onto his knees; it seemed like the news had spread everywhere. They stood there crying together before making a fanfare out of escorting them inside.

Finally his ancestors would no longer be haunted, Zhou Zishu mused — being a good person was really exhausting.

Chapter 9 - In the Woods

Zhao Jing of Tai Hu, also referred to as the Swordsman of Qiu Shan, was once a renowned figure.

Before they got to Tai Hu, Zhou Zishu had been looking forward to meeting this elusive hero whose name preceded his appearance. The anticipation grew when he caught wind of the news that Yu Tianjie — the only son of Hua Shan Sect's patriarch, along with Mu Yunge — lord of Duan Jian Mountain Manor and Sir "One-Eyed" Jiang Che would also be at the same place.

Zhou Zishu knew their status and background like the back of his hand — to avoid offense, Tian Chuang had a separate archive of every single event and figure in jianghu in the last fifty years.

For example, Zhou Zishu knew that Zhao Jing the heroic Qiu Shan Swordsman was once exiled from his family and spent his days in sufferings. For money, he had committed crimes not unlike what "Enchanted Song" Qin Song had done. He only started using his real name Zhao Jing again at twenty seven, marrying the only daughter of the Feng family that owned Tai Hu, using nepotism to build wealth. He also secretly killed off the ones who knew of his past, and was reaccepted into the Zhao family after the marriage.

Another example would be the famous young Sir Yu Tianjie: it was said that he once had a tryst with a maiden from E Mei Sect but betrayed her afterwards, resulting in the girl committing suicide with their unborn child of three months old — of course, she was honorable enough to never reveal the wretched lover's name.

Zhou Zishu was deeply interested in them since he knew all too well the kind of people they all were; besides, he was weak to Zhang Chengling's pleadings, so he agreed to stay at the Zhaos' for one more night.

Despite his past, Zhao Jing did have a gallant aura to him; he didn't look down on the ragged Zhou Zishu who couldn't even walk properly. But he was also experienced, and through Zhang Chengling's stories of the dangers he had to face on the journey, he became suspicious of this beggar-looking man's background.

That day, after helping the two settle down, have a proper shower and food, Zhao Jing called Zhang Chengling to the study to tell him what had happened in the past days.

Zhang Chengling after all was still a child — it was hard enough for him to find someone he could call family; so he told the elder everything, even things that he had yet to understand. Zhao Jing listened to him in terror; and after contemplation he couldn't help but ask, "This... Zhou gentleman, do you know who he really is?"

Zhang Chengling told him what happened at the abandoned shrine without hesitation.

Zhao Jing narrowed his eyes and stroked his beard. He comforted the younger briefly before sending him to bed.

From the ten days of travelling together, Zhou Zishu had come to know this Zhang Chengling child. Despite lacking a lot due to being pampered from a young age, he was a good kid with a good heart, never complaining when facing hardship, to the point of being a little simple-minded. Since Zhao Jing wanted to talk to him, Zhou Zishu was sure that the sly old fox must have succeeded in tricking Zhang Chengling into revealing information about him without meaning to.

He laughed internally — it didn't really matter whether he was Zhou Xu or Zhou Zishu, as both names were shrouded in mystery anyway. Even someone with vast knowledge and ample resources would know no further about Tian Chuang other than the general information about the organization itself, much less its leader.

Even if one investigated into “Lord Zhou”, they would only dig up a nominal general whose responsibility was managing the inner court's royal guards, who was worth currying favor with but not important enough to be looked at twice.

Sure enough, from the early morning of the next day, Zhou Zishu became the newest hot topic among residents in Tai Hu Holdings. It was impossible to leave the guest's room thanks to the never-ending stream of visitors.

He had no choice but to greet and see them off one by one—

Ah, Sir Zhao, truly an honor to finally meet you, seeing is truly believing, your appearance brought such a prosperous aura... You're asking who taught this lowly one? Oh, we're just nobodies, not worth being mentioned at all.

Ah, Sir Qian, truly an honor to finally meet you, seeing is truly believing, your appearance brought such a prosperous aura... Where I'm from? This one is just a lowly beggar, it's not worth mentioning- no no no, I'm not from the Beggar Sect,³⁶ how can I ever be deserving of joining them? I'm just a nobody, really...

Ah, Sir Sun, truly an honor to finally meet you, seeing is truly believing, your appearance brought such a prosperous aura... I'm just a nobody, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary at all that you've never heard of me.

Ah, Sir Li, truly an honor to finally meet you, seeing is truly believing, your appearance brought such a prosperous aura... No no, I've never known that other Sir

³⁶ Also called the Beggar Clan, it's one of the most common sect appearing in a wuxia setting. It's made up of beggar and is famous for intelligence gathering.

Li that well, what we had was just a convenient assistance during hard times. Which sect? I'm from none, just a nobody, not worth mentioning, not worth mentioning at all.

As the night drew near, Zhou Zishu had been smiling so much his entire face was stiffened; it took a lot of massaging for it to return to the natural state. He knew deeply in his soul that complete paralysis wouldn't be far away if he had to suffer one more day of this, so he immediately planned to leave.

Considering the insistence in the inquiries about other people's business, these jianghu heroes were no better than nosy gossipers at markets; it was as if they wished they could have just stick their head into other's house and use their eagle eyes to scan over anything and everything, seeing under the skin to determine if this was a human or a ghost.

If one said they were from one of the Eight Big Sects and was a disciple of this blah blah blah person, the other one could reply that Oh, truly an honor to finally meet you, my shishu³⁷ and your Master knew each other way back.

Otherwise, they would be considered an outsider, and their character needed more time to be judged.

It was night time. Under the waning moon, Zhou Zishu opened his eyes. He had been sleeping early since now was the time for the Nails to cause troubles. But the pain was nothing too serious, he just needed rest.

He stood up, hesitating a little; it was admittedly rude to leave without saying goodbye. He left behind two letters: one for Zhang Chengling, saying "Mountains are still green, waters will still flow long and far"³⁸. An incredible satisfaction washed over him after writing the note, as he felt like he had finally embodied being a jianghu wanderer now. The other letter was for Zhao Jing with one mere sentence: Ever grateful for the welcoming stay.

He placed them under the teapot before gracefully jumping onto the roof.

On the roof was a small dragon li cat³⁹ strolling. It felt a fleeting shadow and halted in alert, eyes wide, but didn't see anything else. Tilting its head in confusion, the cat ran towards the kitchen.

³⁷ 师叔 (shīshū) – Uncle-Master is the apprentice-brother (both senior and junior) of one's Master in a sect.

³⁸ Means that there is still lots of time for Zhou Zishu and Zhang Chengling to meet again.

³⁹ A Chinese breed of domestic cat.

Zhou Zishu left the Zhaos without a sound. He was sure that no one had noticed, so never would he have imagined that there was someone seemingly having predicted his moves and was already waiting for him in a small forest only a mile away from the Holdings.

Zhou Zishu felt annoyance creeping up the moment he glanced at that person. He saw Wen Kexing saluting him smilingly, “Ah, how coincidental, Brother Zhou. Seems like we are fated after all; only soulmates would keep crossing paths under the moonlight like this.”

Zhou Zishu smiled back, “Truly coincidental isn’t it, Brother Wen?”

Coincidental my ass, you pestilence, he thought.

He tilted his head, asking after not seeing Gu Xiang, “Young Miss Gu’s not here?”

Wen Kexing gave a straightforward answer, “That little girl is an inconvenience, she walks too slow; she’ll only be in the way while I’m looking for this important, elusive figure that is... you.”

The smile froze on Zhou Zishu’s face. He stared at Wen Kexing, then spoke after a good while, “If this useless one was an important figure, then what would become of Monk Gu of Mount Chang Ming, the Poison King of the Southern Sea’s Guanyin Palace, or the Ghost Lord of Qingzhu Ridge?”

Wen Kexing stared back meaningfully. “Monk Gu cares none for the mortals, all he seeks is the path of cultivation; the Poison King is said to have blended into the vast world of jianghu, it’d be a hard feat to find him; and the Ghost Lord is no less ambiguous, never have I got the chance to meet this one... as for whether he’s human or not, it’s a story for another day.”

They looked at each other after that, smiles carrying malicious intentions.

Zhou Zishu was the first to turn his eyes away. “Zhou-mou⁴⁰ is merely a passerby, why is it that everyone have their eyes on me?”

Wen Kexing replied with a manner not unlike when one reunited with an old friend during a spring hiking. “Then why doesn’t Brother Zhou stay with the Zhaos for a while longer? Tai Hu is popular for its pretty scenery, why must you leave this soon without looking around a bit?”

“This useless one has already experienced Tai Hu’s incredible view, staying will only create unnecessary inconveniences for Sir Zhao. Not to mention we don’t know

⁴⁰ 某 (mǒu) is an old-fashioned honorific used to refer to oneself in a formal manner.

each other that well; I did the favor for two silvers, it's not worth risking my life for them."

Zhou Zishu paused before adding, "Escorting the young master Zhang is purely for gathering merits, so that I won't have to endure any tortures in the Underworld after death. That's all to it."

"Gathering merits." Wen Kexing repeated in agreement somewhat, head nodding, "Correct, Brother Zhou truly shares the same mind with me; and as only beautiful people can do that, it is clear--"

Zhou Zishu's temples throbbed at "it is clear"; he was about to interrupt when suddenly, a piercing scream was heard deep inside the forest behind Wen Kexing.

They both temporarily stopped.

Wen Kexing pointed to the direction of the scream, "See, my dear soulmate, another chance for merit gathering has appeared."

Zhou Zishu showed hesitation, but eventually decided to go towards the direction of the sound, grudgingly replying to the other at the same time, "Eye problems are very serious, Brother Wen, you should look for a physician soon."

Wen Kexing followed close behind. Zhou Zishu's qinggong⁴¹ had reached the stage where he could travel without leaving any traces, but the other man was able to keep up with him without fail, always keeping a small distance. Normally, one would stay silent during the travelling, so as not to lose their vital energy, but Wen Kexing didn't seem to mind it. "Brother Zhou is very correct; I do have to see some famous physicians whenever I have the chance to get treated properly. Up until now I'm still unable to find any mistakes in Brother Zhou's disguise; what awful eyesight I have and I'm not even that old yet, how shameful, shameful."

Zhou Zishu really wanted to get rid of those eyes that were supposedly "getting worse every day".

But on second thought, he didn't know enough about this man, and with the intellect and self-restraint of a former Tian Chuang's leader, he would not do something foolish like that.

With an incredible speed, soon enough they reached the deeper part of the forest. There they saw a corpse.

⁴¹ Qinggong is a Chinese martial art technique, often portrayed in wuxia fiction as the ability to move lightly and inhumanly fast, such as gliding on the water surface or travelling through the air without any external help.

The person died a ghastly death: dressed in black clothes, their mask fallen to both sides, revealing wide-open eyes. Zhou Zishu felt a sense of familiarity before he even got to see the body clearly, so he bent down to inspect further. He couldn't help but frown afterwards, "Isn't this... Sir Mu, lord of Duan Jian Mountain Manor?"

Just this morning he was rambling to no ends for an hour; no one could have thought that he also became a "night owl" like Zhou Zishu, then a dead owl, unfortunately.

Wen Kexing approached as well, rubbing his chin with interest, "Moonlit night, black clothes, it's possible that..."

Zhou Zishu turned to the other, ready to hear his deductions.

Only for Wen Kexing to continue his brilliant train of thought: "...that Lord Mu is out here picking flowers?⁴²"

Zhou Zishu turned away, face expressionless, internally praising himself for keeping his composure.

There was no trace of blood on Mu Yunge's body or beside him, but his lips had gotten bluer. Zhou Zishu, after some thought, opened the front of his shirt. On his chest was only a black mark in the shape of a hand.

⁴² Slang for sexual harassment.

Chapter 10 - Netherworld

Zhou Zishu stared at the handprint for a while, then turned the corpse front-down, undressing the body's upper half—another handprint was on his back at the same position.

Wen Kexing sighed, “Was he branded, or the attack went through his body?”

Zhou Zishu replied nonchalantly. “No one would waste their time to play with the dead, the attack went through from one side of his body to the other. I can only think of one person in the recent fifty years who is able to do this...”

“It's the Raksha⁴³ Palms from Sun Ding the Delighted Mourning Ghost,” Wen Kexing continued.

Zhou Zishu glanced at him without replying, kneeling down to search Mu Yunge's body carefully. What he found were some banknotes and silvers. “Oh, stealthily left the Zhao's Holdings at late night while carrying travel expenses...” Zhou Zishu touched his own chest—so did he.

“Brother Wen, this night owl isn't out here to pick flowers, a sex offender doesn't need this much cash with him.”

“Probably doesn't need extra clothes for bathing, either.” Wen Kexing kicked a small bag hidden in a bush into the open. The bag was also made of black cloth, and inside was some clothes for changing when one was away from home.

The forest earth was damp and soft with a chaotic map of footprints on it, but there didn't seem to be evidence of a fight. Beside the mark of the hand which caused instant death, there weren't any other wounds or scars on Mu Yunge's body. His famous sword was by his hip, still sheathed.

Mu Yunge's kungfu was definitely above average, at least he would not fight back like a suckling. Zhou Zishu fell into silence, thinking perhaps the dignified and righteous swordsman of Duan Jian Manor and the Delighted Mourning Ghost of the Valley had arranged a date?

A bloody one at that, which likely started out as a passionate but the passion turned into anger afterwards.

There seemed to be three people present before they arrived; and while Mu Yunge's footprints stopped here, the other two's went in different directions, suggesting they might not be on the same side. One was no doubt chasing after Mu Yunge to this place, then sat down to examine the body just like what Zhou Zishu was doing right now.

⁴³ Rakshasa is a demon existing in Hindu mythology and Buddhism.

Zhou Zishu squatted on the ground, the old habit of questioning everything rearing its head again, making his insides itch. He felt an urge to follow the footprints, but rationality warned him that it would only lead to troubles. He was no longer the all-knowing mighty leader of Tian Chuang, there was no point in burdening himself with inconveniences.

Wen Kexing watched his companion sit in a terribly indecent fashion and look like it would take him forever to stand up. After a long while he couldn't help but ask, "You won't pursue them?"

Zhou Zishu stared at him, still waging an internal war.

Wen Kexing, after some thought, strode after the second one's footprints, saying, "Then I will."

Zhou Zishu followed him unconsciously, speaking in surprise, "You really want to be involved in something that's not your business?"

Wen Kexing's face was serious. "Someone killed the Lord of Duan Jian Manor, and I'm a charitable person who wants to gather merits, so why not. And I'm bored anyway."

Zhou Zishu felt like the last sentence was incredibly reasonable, so he nodded, inquiring again, "Then why don't you follow the first person? Their footprints are very light, so they seem to be the strongest among the three. Hypothetically speaking, if the third one was the last to come here and was from the Zhao's Holding, then the first person is definitely Sun Ding the Delighted Mourning Ghost."

Wen Kexing completely deadpanned, "You can chase after him if you want, I might be a nosy charitable person, but I also value my life."

Zhou Zishu was made speechless by the other's honesty. He followed Wen Kexing closely, looking at the ground under them at a random point and noticing—Wen Kexing didn't even leave any footprints.

Someone who could travel without leaving a trace really just said that he was afraid of a ghost, afraid of death.

Zhou Zishu, who used to manage and investigate all kinds of matter in the palace, decided to follow his desire to see this case through—since he was already near death, he would do whatever he wanted, there was nothing in this world of which he should be afraid anymore.

The two skilled and fearless men sprinted across the forest like shuttles. They found who they were looking for by the river bank—Yu Tianjie of Hua Shan.

He was strung up on a tree with silver threads that looked like a spider web; head almost fallen off his shoulder, only barely intact in the gentle blowing wind.

A drop of blood fell on the ground, which prompted Wen Kexing to step back to avoid being stained. Then he nudged Yu Tianjie's head, completely severing it from the body—the former part was still hung up by the threads, the latter part dropped to the ground with a thud. Wen Kexing touched the body all over, mouth pursed, “Still warm, he died not long ago.”

“Spider Silk.” Zhou Zishu looked up to Yu Tianjie's head, pausing shortly “It's the Hanged Ghost's Spider Silk.”

Tai Hu was truly destined for an exciting time to come.

Suddenly, Zhou Zishu's ears caught on to something. He shouted, “Who's there?”

Behind the tree, a shadow appeared and flew away, looking like a giant bat and disappearing almost instantly. Without hesitation, Zhou Zishu went after it.

Wen Kexing still stood there, mumbling, “I'm scared of dying, scared of dying... Hmm... that's why I can't stay here alone.” Then he followed suit.

Zhou Zishu took a pine cone, fingers crooked and aiming at the person in black's middle back; but since he always lacked strength after midnight, and coupled with the fact that he had been running for a long time, even though he hit the target, it only made them stumble forward a little and not falling as expected. They didn't even look back, only running faster.

Zhou Zishu had doubts about whether this was the real Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost. Evidently he would not be able to stand against this man, but if he was really one of Qingzhu Ridge's Ten Great Ghosts, would he run after seeing a nobody like him?

Zhou Zishu thought in astonishment, “I'm not a magic mirror⁴⁴ either...”

They got out of the forest in a relatively short time. Behind the forest was a cemetery that spread wide and far, with will-o'-wisps flickering all over the place. Seemed like the Hanged Ghost had reached his territory, as his silhouette became more mystical. Zhou Zishu was not sure if his mind was playing tricks on him, but he felt like he heard someone cackling. The laugh was right next to his ears for a sec, then far away the other, making his hair stand on end.

⁴⁴ 照妖镜 (zhàoyāojìng) is used figuratively to describe things/people that can see the true nature of things and differentiate good and evil.

Then the Hanged Ghost disappeared into thin air among the will-o'-wisp.

Zhou Zishu abruptly stopped walking.

Wen Kexing stood beside him, the greenish light casted onto his handsome face, giving him a slightly more demonic look. Some kind of animal let out a howl from far away; and a rat crawled out from underground, staring at the two without fear. It might have devoured the flesh of the dead, since its tiny eyes were pure red.

The Hanged Ghost disappeared under an old locust tree with an owl perched on its branch. The animal tilted its head at the two uninvited guests.

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing checked around the tree but found no more clues. Zhou Zishu frowned, "We've really met a ghost..."

Then he heard a creepy laugh, turning to Wen Kexing with gooseflesh prickling his skin. His companion pointed at the owl; turned out the sound was from this ghostly animal.

The owl and Zhou Zishu had a decently long staring contest before the former spread its wings and flew away without warning.

Wen Kexing said, "There's this thing I heard when I was little, that owls are only scary when they laugh because there will be death whenever they do. Are you afraid?"

Zhou Zishu was examining the tombstone under the tree, which didn't have any writings on it. He replied with indifference, "There're already two bodies."

It was likely that Wen Kexing felt particularly in the mood, so he ignored the answer, continuing with enthusiasm. "I also heard that one day at this small village there was a person carrying a bowl with red water inside. An owl knocked the bowl over, and that year twenty people lost their lives."

Zhou Zishu raised his head to look at him.

Wen Kexing lowered his voice on purpose, "It's true."

"Why did that villager carry a bowl with red water?" Zhou Zishu asked in confusion.

Wen Kexing choked on his words, turning away to cough.

A faint smile appeared on Zhou Zishu's face. All of a sudden, he put his hands on the tombstone, and with just a bit of strength applied, it moved. He tried harder to push it to one side, and with a squashing sound, an entrance was revealed, leading into a dark space with unknown depth.

Wen Kexing hurried to take a closer look, going round and round in front of the cave's entrance, tongue clicking, "It's rumored that the point of connection between yin and yang carries a lot of yin energy, so there must be a dead locust tree next to it—do you know that it's called the yin tree, or the ghost tree?"

Zhou Zishu had his arms crossed, face expressionless at the other's ghost stories.

Wen Kexin's descriptions were vivid. "Under the old locust there will be an unknown tombstone, and under them is the path to the Underworld in legends. During the full moon of the seventh month,⁴⁵ wandering souls will crawl out from the nether to return to the mortal realm. The path to the Yellow Spring⁴⁶ is incredibly cold, and at the end you'll see the gates of hell. Once going past that, you'll no longer see the living, there are equinox flowers⁴⁷ growing along the way, and then you'll reach the Bridge of Helplessness...⁴⁸ Hey!"

Zhou Zishu already jumped down.

Wen Kexing stared dumbfoundedly at the other's silhouette disappearing behind the entrance before jumping himself. He landed steadily, finding out that the earth was very firm. He looked up to see Zhou Zishu's fleeting smile and the other asking, "Is Brother Wen also interested in seeing the path to the Underworld?"

Wen Kexing nodded, entirely serious. "So that the next time I tell my tales, I can officially add that they're true stories."

Zhou Zishu shook his head, still smiling. All of a sudden, Wen Kexing silenced them with a gesture, listening attentively with a frown. "Can you... hear it? What's that sound?" His voice lowered.

Zhou Zishu tried to distinguish it carefully, his answer indecisive. "...Is it water?"

In split seconds, Wen Kexing lit up, taking the lead without forgetting to keep his voice down, "So the legends are true indeed!"

In front of them was a long narrow path; so cramped that two men couldn't walk side by side, only when they had to shrink their shoulders and crouch down was it

⁴⁵ The fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Chinese calendar is also called the Ghost Day. The seventh month is regarded as when spirits and ghosts come out of the Underworld.

⁴⁶ Chinese term for the Underworld.

⁴⁷ The flowers associated with death. They are also believed to grow in Hell and guide the souls into their next reincarnation.

⁴⁸ The bridge that every soul has to cross before being reincarnated.

somewhat manageable. Zhou Zishu did not enjoy this posture at all, thinking that maybe this path was not the official, but one reserved only to women and children.

It was unclear how far in they had gone. Dirt fell on both of them, but the end was bright and vast—it led to a large cave, with a small river flowing across with unknown origin and destination.

There seemed to be wind inside this cave, but it was also unclear where it came from, the dreary chill came at them from every directions.

Even Wen Kexing shut his mouth at that moment, no longer rambling about how “the path to the Yellow Spring is incredibly cold”.

Chapter 11 - The Cave

Zhou Zishu stood before the “Yellow Spring” in contemplation before turning back to the way he came. The devil made work for idle hands; all the time lazying around at the Zhao’s had apparently made him jump down here without a thought—Hua Shan Sect’s patriarch was no honorable type but his son was even worse, having indulged in debauchery at such a young age.

Besides, they were all pugilist wanderers, being attacked was all in a day’s work. No matter where Yu Tianjie was severed—his head or his family jewels—it didn’t concern Zhou Zishu in the slightest.

It might have been for Wen Kexing’s ghostly tales, but he suddenly had a bad feeling. The underground cave carried a sinister atmosphere. Zhou Zishu calculated; since he only had two and a half years left, it was better to help the dying and injured, making the best of his time to do good.

Not crawling into a grave with a man who was not always right in the head.

But when he was tracing the way back, there was an abrupt “thud”, like a mechanism being switched. Around the entrance, hundreds of steel knives extended from the wall, blocking the path.

Zhou Zishu was fortunate to have retreated in time, or else he would have been skewered.

He frowned, staring at those knives then looked at Wen Kexing, “Who did you offend?”

The surprise question left Wen Kexing’s eyes wide open, he looked like he was greatly wounded by the words. “Why is it that I had to offend someone for this to happen?”

Zhou Zishu scoffed and shook his head. He had no choice but to move forward along the “Yellow Spring”; it was possible that he could find another exit somewhere. “Are you saying it’s because of me and not you? I’m virtually unknown and have just entered jianghu recently, I have never commit thievery, the only thing I have been doing is travelling in peace. Who could ever hold a grudge against me?”

Wen Kexing fell into silence, having enough of his companion’s bold-faced lies. After a while, he spoke with a gentle voice, “You escorted Zhang Chengling; you have killed thirty two in total along the way, including four of the extremely dangerous type like Qin Song...”

“My ass, there’re only eleven at most.” Zhou Zishu replied, “Those in the shrine died under your little maid’s hands.”

“So it’s still definitely you.” Wen Kexing held out his hands, “These hands of mine; ever since I left home to join jianghu they have not been stained with any blood, even that of a chicken, much less a human. How can it be possible that I have offended anyone?”

Zhou Zishu didn’t spare him a glance.

That prompted Wen Kexing to walk faster, standing in front of the other with an exaggerated expression of seriousness. “It might be hard to believe because of how I look, but I swear I’m a good person.”

Zhou Zishu nodded, “Of course, Mister “Good Person” Wen. Now that it’s clear I’m just a murderous demon, it’s better for you to get out of my way.”

Wen Kexing seemed to ignore the half-hearted nature of the response as he still wore a blinding smile, “I will leave you alone once you admit that you’re wearing a disguise.”

Zhou Zishu smiled back, “How generous of you.”

“Please, don’t mention it.”

Zhou Zishu side-stepped him to go forward.

Wen Kexing followed two steps behind, still smiling.

The water of the spring flowed quite rapidly. Zhou Zishu kicked a rock down there, but it was unable to see the true depth. It twisted and turned in a complicated pattern, and there also seemed to be fish but they swam too fast to be visible. Zhou Zishu was not good at swimming, the best he could do was holding his breath for a long time underwater so he would not die instantly upon jumping down. After examining, he decided it was better to stay away from it.

The cave seemed to connect to many paths at all directions, since the sound of their footsteps and conversations could travel real far. Suddenly, Zhou Zishu stopped walking. “Brother Wen, look.”

Wen Kexing followed his gaze to a pile of bones not too far away.

He mumbled, “Shouldn’t the path to the Yellow Spring be lined with equinox flowers? And the dead should only have their souls left, why are there bones here?”

Zhou Zishu flicked at the bones, holding up a half-destroyed skull on one hand and the matchbook on another, sizing it up carefully. “This skull was crushed, the part

where it connects to the spine seems to be slashed... Hm? No, the wound is uneven, there are teeth marks here. Did an animal bite them?”

“Can an animal bite someone’s head off?” Wen Kexing asked.

Zhou Zishu picked up a thigh bone. “Teeth marks... More teeth marks, they’re quite small...”

He was hit with a sense of familiarity, as if he had seen them before somewhere. But he had never been a coroner,⁴⁹ so the memory slipped his mind at the time.

Wen Kexing felt his stomach churning a little, taking the thigh bone from Zhou Zishu with only two fingers. “This is... quite a clean work we’ve got here; even cleaner than me gnawing on chicken bones.” He said after examining.

Zhou Zishu decided to stop having chicken drumsticks from now on.

“Who could’ve left such bites, can it be a wild beast?” Wen Kexing thought about it for a bit, “I heard that in the underworld there is this giant beast called Di Ting,⁵⁰ do you know if it likes meat or not?”

—it was clear that he still hadn’t given up on his ghost stories.

Zhou Zishu put on a fake smile, “You just have to wait until you’re a hundred years old and leave this world to go down to hell...”

He didn’t get to finish as there were sounds of water sloshing behind them. In the dark cave, the sounds made their hair stand on end. Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing turned to that direction and took one step back, facing the small river with their guard raised.

Wen Kexing spoke slowly, “I also heard that Di Ting doesn’t live in the Yellow Spring, and there aren’t that many, either.”

Out from the river crawled many... human-looking creatures, but not really. Their limbs were extra long and their stature was short. They were completely naked, their flesh pale from being underwater, and they had very long hair. Their body width was unnaturally large, twice or thrice that of a normal human. Their eyes shone a distant light while they gradually drew closer.

⁴⁹ 仵作 (wǔzuò) is an old term to call coroners.

⁵⁰ 谛听 (dìtīng) is a mythical beast in Buddhism under the control of Kṣitigarbha. It is said to be able to see through everything and can detect people’s truest desires in their heart.

Zhou Zishu looked down and bit his wrist, then spoke to Wen Kexing while staring at the faint teeth marks. “I remember it now, those small marks are...”

“Are what?” Wen Kexing asked while retreating.

“Human teeth.”

Wen Kexing halted after that, coughing, fixing his hair and clothes. He made a salutation at the approaching monsters. “My... good brothers, we barged into this place completely by accident, we didn’t at all mean to offend, so please...”

Zhou Zishu snorted in an uncharming way. The humanoid monsters let out a ghastly howl before coming at Wen Kexing.

Wen Kexing yelled indignantly, “I haven’t finished!”

In contrast, he dodged the attackers like a flying leaf, moving to the side without any effort. The monster’s reflexes and movements were fast as they immediately changed direction to chase after him, claws extracted and glinting, leaving marks on the ground that were about two inches⁵¹ deep.

Zhou Zishu smiled. “How is it, Brother Wen, are you speechless?”

The monsters’ attack officially began. Zhou Zishu wouldn’t treat those like humans as they were definitely far from it; their durability was unfathomable and their destructive power was immense. They were also fast and didn’t seem to experience pain.

Zhou Zishu’s hand was on one’s chest, attacking it with all of his might. A rock would have exploded after that move, but as the monster was knocked flying back against the wall, they only screeched before standing back up.

Zhou Zishu was internally unsettled, he couldn’t think of what it actually was.

He heard a “crack!” beside him. It turned out to be a sneak attacker being caught and having its neck snapped by Wen Kexing.

Wen Kexing smiled, “Now I’ve saved you once.”

Zhou Zishu also realized in contrast to their firm body mass, the monster’s neck was incredibly fragile, unable to support its head at times.

⁵¹ 寸 (cùn) is a traditional unit of length, also called Chinese inch. 1 cun is about 1.312 in.

He was surprised that Wen Kexing found out so quickly. Despite that, he replied with politeness, "Thank you."

Another one barged at them, which Zhou Zishu evaded. His elbow curved to strike at the monster's back, and his fingers made a clawing movement to twist the neck.

They made light work of taking down a few more. At least those creatures still had a bit of intellect in them, as they grew fearful after not being able to subdue their preys. Their leader howled, and they slowly returned to the water. Randomly, one would have its head above the water, staring at their abnormally powerful intruders.

Zhou Zishu whispered, "With their size, they can clearly bite our heads off. We shouldn't stay here any longer, let's go."

Wen Kexing replied after a bout of contemplative silence, "I've figured it out."

Zhou Zishu presumed he had found out what the monster was. "Figured out what?" He asked without thinking.

"Real human skin will redden if you pinch it, since I can't make out your disguise, can you let me pinch your face a little?"

Zhou Zishu walked away, not bothering with an answer. He must have been mad for having taken this person seriously.

Wen Kexing followed him close behind. "Did I finally get you, and because of that you don't want me to touch your face? I knew it, I knew you used some kind of tricks! Are you so beautiful that you're afraid some sleazy deviants will be after you? No worries, Brother Zhou, I am a completely righteous and honorable individual, I'll never do any harm. So, can you let me see your true visage..."

Zhou Zishu turned a deaf ear with incredible restraint.

But then Wen Kexing changed his tone. "Although, your skills are truly no joke, I can't think of anyone who can be that good. Are you... from the fabled 'Tian Chuang'?"

Zhou Zishu stopped walking. In the darkness of the cave, Wen Kexing's smile seemed to carry another meaning to it. But Zhou Zishu only held up his index finger to stop the other, voice lowered, "Can you hear it?"

They went quiet. In the deeper part of the cave echoed the roars of a beast. "It's the one that can bite off a human's head."

Wen Kexing had no interest in those beasts, his eyes were fixed on Zhou Zishu alone. The man didn't react to his earlier words at all, only listening to his surroundings intently; his eyes and expressions never wavered.

Another roar can be heard, significantly louder now, as if the beast had moved closer. Zhou Zishu saw the underwater monsters all cowering in supposed fear. He tugged at Wen Kexing, and they took a turn into another trail. Zhou Zishu took out a small bottle, sprinkling something along the way.

Then they hid in a corner and held their breath.

Chapter 12 - Illusions

Wen Kexing had no idea what the dust that Zhou Zishu had sprinkled was but he didn't ask, as if he already knew what the other was capable of. He stood beside Zhou Zishu silently. Seconds later, the heavy breathing of the slowly approaching beast could be heard. The creature seemed to have noticed something, maintaining a slow tread. It went by a spot that was about ten feet away from them.

The creature was dog-like but as big as a pony, black all over. It panted through the nose, and in the air was a faint fishy smell. It slowed down even more, sniffing the air like it was suspicious of something.

Zhou Zishu crossed his arms in front of his chest, leaning on the wall, eyes narrowed, watching the scene intently.

There was a fleeting hint of a smile on Wen Kexing's face; it was chilling and only there for a split second.

The beast was not far away but it had yet to notice the two's presence. It stood still for a while then moved forward, being watched by two pair of human eyes. It followed the smell of blood to the corpses of the underwater monsters. After sniffing, it bellowed, head lowered and mouth chewing happily—it truly was able to decapitate the humanoid monsters.

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu glanced at each other. Zhou Zishu was quietly terrified; while he wasn't a coroner, he had been through a lot in life and his knowledge was vast, it was impossible that he couldn't recognize a human head. Is that creature really human? He mused.

If it was, how did it come to this?

Wen Kexing poked at him, pointing at a small road. Zhou Zishu nodded, leaving carefully.

The road widened and narrowed in an unpredictable fashion. After an unknown amount of turns far away from their starting point, Wen Kexing asked, "There are other teeth marks on the bones of those dead monsters, do you think they cannibalize?"

When he wasn't talking nonsense, his voice was low, almost like sighing with no strength to it, as if he didn't want to waste energy; completed with a hint of indifference. He paused, then continued, "Are they human?"

Zhou Zishu looked at him, voice also low, "Forgive me, I'm just a fool with shallow knowledge."

“Wen Kexing laughed softly, “You, shallow knowledge? Hah.”

He didn't ask further and kept walking.

After an indefinite time, at another turn, when the rapidly flowing “Yellow Spring” appeared again in front of their eyes, Zhou Zishu called out, “Wait.”

Wen Kexing looked back at him, the irritating demeanor making a return, “What's wrong, beautiful Brother Zhou?”

Zhou Zishu knew all too well that reacting would only goad the other on, so he ignored the gibberish. “Those underwater creatures are incredibly strong and fast, and they can move in the water naturally. The beast we saw walks on land and is aware that it has to stay away from the river; if it doesn't hunt near the water, how can it catch the monsters?”

Wen Kexing stopped walking, examining the ground under them. It was unclear whether he was monologuing or speaking to Zhou Zishu, “How big is this place?”

Why did it feel like the road was never-ending?

Zhou Zishu suddenly spoke after falling into pensiveness. “This river flows from east to west. I remember the direction very clearly; even though we took a few turns, we're still going in the north-south direction...”

“You mean we're running in circles?” Sudden enthusiasm took over Wen Kexing, he blinked, “I also heard about this one story where a person...”

Zhou Zishu turned his back to him, making a mark on the wall with his fingertip; then wordlessly left to walk along the mysterious river.

Wen Kexing didn't mind his ghost stories being ignored. He rubbed his nose, following the other with a smile.

Suddenly, they heard a roar that seemed to shake the whole cave. In the middle of it was a piercing scream that possibly belonged to a child.

Zhou Zishu stopped walking.

The child's miserable crying began to get louder.

Zhou Zishu swiftly dashed to that direction, he was ten feet away in just a blink of an eye. Wen Kexing didn't get to say what he wanted to, his extending arm hanging in midair. He swallowed back the words, shaking his head and following the other.

They saw under the claws of the half-dog-half-horse creature was a little girl. The big fangs were right next to the girl's pale neck, seemingly about to bite down. Zhou Zishu propelled himself higher in the air and struck down at the monster. Ranged attack was one of his fortes, and the creature was hit right in the head, its whole body knocked and rolled to one side.

He picked up the child who was only weakly breathing.

The beast shook its head with all its might, as if it was disoriented after being hit. After a moment, it realized that Zhou Zishu had stolen its food and roared, charging toward him.

At first Zhou Zishu was going to throw her to Wen Kexing by instinct but then paused. His feet started to move around in a strange pattern, his body mysteriously able to retreat several feet away. He put the girl down and kept moving.

The beast followed, the stench from its bloody mouth was headache-inducing. Zhou Zishu jumped to a high place before landing himself on top of the beast in just seconds.

Wen Kexing stood there, completely disregarding the crying girl with an expressionless face.

Zhou Zishu used 'The Fall of A Thousand Weight'⁵² to keep the beast down, but it was a smart creature, its body toppling over to roll—if someone were to roll with it, they would be crushed to dust even if they were made of metal.

Zhou Zishu immediately took advantage of that to jump down with a shout, kicking at its belly.

The creature's back was full of tough muscles but the stomach area was really soft, and the kick nearly turned over every organ inside. It roared in pain, but could still stand up thanks to the thick skin's protection. Its mouth widened to bite at Zhou Zishu. Its back legs were incredibly strong and despite being in agony, it was still very fast. Zhou Zishu was about to dodge when his internal strength suddenly hit a wall.

The beast's sharp teeth were right in front of him at that moment. He pressed down at his chest with one palm and bent the elbow of the other arm, risking his life facing the attack to hit his elbow at the creature's nose. There was a sound of its nose being broken, its claw tearing Zhou Zishu's left shoulder, making him bleed instantly.

Zhou Zishu realized the nose was the creature's weakness. He ignored his wound, using his hand to strike at the beast's nose again with enough momentum to

⁵² A martial art move from the Cherry Blossom Pole (梅花樁) kungfu style.

completely shatter the bones on its forehead too. It staggered a few steps and went down with a loud rumble.

Zhou Zishu frowned, blocking the acupuncture points on his shoulder to stop the bleeding. He was about to use the water from the “Yellow Spring” to clean the wound, but then remembered the half-human-half-demon creatures down there and gave up the idea. He heard Wen Kexing let out an “Oh”, then, “Do you have internal injuries?”

Zhou Zishu turned his head to glance at the other and replied calmly, “Just haven’t had enough food tonight.”

Then he bent down to pick up the young girl, patting her back and speaking to her with a gentle voice, “Where are you from, how did you get here?”

Wen kexing laughed mockingly at that. “You should rather ask her what kind of demon she is. Why did you save her anyway?”

The girl didn’t say anything, only burrowing herself deeper into Zhou Zishu’s embrace.

Zhou Zishu stopped asking, saying to Wen Kexing, “For gathering merits.”

Wen Kexing stared at his bloody shoulder in deep thoughts, then suddenly smiled, “I’ve caught you, Brother Zhou forgot to disguise the skin on your shoulder, that area looks really different from your face and neck.”

Zhou Zishu only paused for a few seconds before answering curtly, “It’s because of sunbathing.”

Wen kexing was still smiling, “Is it really? This is the first time I’ve heard that a pale beauty can have that haggard shade of skin after sunbathing.”

“Pale Beauty” Zhou Zishu was given the heebies-jeebies after those words. Still carrying the girl, he was about to say something when his eyes caught something and saw a strange scene: on the body of the dead beast, a plant sprung up, glowing then blooming... it’s a cherry blossom tree!

Wen Kexing followed his gaze, his face quickly paling.

Zhou Zishu had no time to care about that, he stood stock still, gawking at the still-growing blossom tree. In the air was an unknown fragrance. The body of the doglike beast was nowhere to be seen, and the flowers kept blooming as though absorbing magical energy; soon, it spread out wide—seemed like he could even touch it if he had reached out.

Then there was a person standing under the tree.

He was a young man with thick brows and big eyes, full lips seemingly always smiling. Blossom petals fell on his shoulders but he cared none about it, only extending his hand, lips moving. Zhou Zishu could make out what he was speaking—senior brother.

It was Jiuxiao...

At that moment, it was possible that his heart had stopped beating.

There was sudden sharp pain on his shoulder. Zhou Zishu cried out, having lowered his guard. He looked down to see the little girl in his arms opening her mouth to sink her teeth into his wound.

He acted on instinct and used internal strength to throw her off. When he pulled himself together, the cherry blossom tree and the person disappeared—in front of him now was only the dark cave with the beast's corpse on the ground and the pile of bones that they had examined moments ago.

The girl that he threw off let out an inhuman scream. When he looked clearly, she was not at all a human girl, but actually the underwater monster!

The little monster screamed with its mouth open, staring at his bleeding wound hungrily. It was eager to pounce again, but suddenly a hand stuck out and grabbed its neck. The creature didn't even get to struggle before its neck was snapped and it died immediately.

Wen Kexing lips curled in amusement, discarding the body without a thought. He spoke as if nothing happened, "Those underwater things still dare go on land even when they're afraid of the beast. Seems like there aren't just us two down here."

All strength seemed to have left Zhou Zishu, he forced out a laugh, "Did we just go in circles and back to the original spot then?"

Wen Kexing sized him up. "Can you walk? I can carry you... bridal style is completely alright too, as long as you let me see your real face."

Zhou Zishu smiled drily, "Thank you, but there's no need."

He covered the shoulder wound, lifted his spirits and continued walking along the "Yellow Spring". Then he asked like he just remembered something, "Back then I saw a tree with flowers growing from the beast's corpse, with prince's feathers⁵³ jumping and singing. What did you see?"

⁵³ A plant of the Polygonaceae family, also called the "dog's tail" plant in China due to the shape of the flowers.

Wen Kexing replied from behind him, “I saw an owl—I told you before that owls laughing will only bring bad luck, and I was right wasn’t I—then I also a person carrying a bowl with red water, and the owl knocked it over...”

Zhou Zishu kept his mouth shut. He told a lie, it was fair that his companion told a lie in return.

He took the lead and didn’t look back, so he didn’t see Wen Kexing’s expression at that moment—the smile on the man’s face seemed to freeze there for a long time and his eyes were blank. It was unclear that he was looking down at the ground or at something very far away. Seeing that Zhou Zishu had no patience for his owl story, he swallowed it down and followed the other.

Chapter 13 - Exposed

Zhou Zishu abruptly stopped walking and sized up the four cave entrances with a frown. “There’s water and wind in here, the chances for someone to poison us are low,” He said.

He wouldn’t call himself an expert in medicine-related matters, but the current Emperor during his years as Crown Prince used to be acquainted with a young shaman from South Xinjiang⁵⁴ who was held hostage at the capital. The shaman was following orders from the Shaman Valley to use the pugilist scene in Zhong Yuan⁵⁵ as test subject for their medicine, and most of the South Xinjiang-originated remedies and poisons which were unheard of at that time were brought here by him.

Zhou Zishu might not possess an intensive knowledge, but he had seen enough to know that there had yet to exist a poison that could cause hallucination for this long.

Wen Kexing nodded, “So someone has used divination to find ways to trap us here—do you know anything about it?”

Zhou Zishu replied calmly, “The stuffs about three directions, eight trigrams and six jias?⁵⁶”

“You must’ve studied a lot of things, even this...” Wen Kexing said in surprise.

Zhou Zishu was nonplussed. “Of course I don’t, that’s all I know about it.” He decided to sit down as walking further was an impossible feat. While leaning back onto the wall, he carelessly let the wound graze the surface. He shivered and slightly grimaced, unable to process the fact that a mere wild beast could agonize him to this state; but such was the life of being seen as a nuisance everywhere he went.

Wen Kexing thought about how he at least knew what “three directions and eight trigrams” actually was and felt a sense of intellectual superiority; but after he remembered that Zhou Zishu sold himself for two silvers, the superiority fell flat. So he sat down beside the injured man, tilting his head to look at the wound, somewhat delighted at the other’s misfortune, “Serves you right for treating a monster like a little girl.”

Zhou Zishu closed his eyes to recuperate, paying no attention to him.

⁵⁴ Xinjiang is one of China’s administrative subdivision, located in the northwest of the country.

⁵⁵ The central plains of China.

⁵⁶ 奇门遁甲 (qímén dùnjiǎ) is an ancient form of divination in China. The elements mentioned by Zhou Zishu are some of the aspects of Chinese metaphysics that this technique is based on.

Wen Kexing silently stood up, walked away and returned after a while. Zhou Zishu felt a spike of coldness on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes to Wen Kexing using a soaked piece of cloth to wash the wound.

On instinct, Zhou Zishu avoided the touch, but Wen Kexing held back his shoulder, “Don’t move.”

Zhou Zishu asked with a pained face, “Where did you get the water from?”

“The river.” Wen Kexing replied. After some thinking, he added, “It’s running water, really clean.”

Zhou Zishu felt his hair stand on end. He knew it was running water, so drinking from it was no problem, much less using it to treat injuries; but he couldn’t stop thinking about those underwater creatures roaming around under there.

Sharp-eyed Wen Kexing happily teased the other after noticing the goosebumps, “Can you really be disgusted when you look like a ragged beggar yourself? Come on, stop acting like a maiden.”

Zhou Zishu knew the other had a point; nevertheless, he glanced at the other’s handkerchief witheringly. The fragrance from it—a gentle and elegant smell of beauty products—attacked his nostrils, and at the corner was a small but exquisitely embroidered orchid. The size was a bit too big and it looked too plain for a maiden to use, but if this was a man’s... what kind of person would carry this on them?

He couldn’t help but give Wen Kexing a weird look and teased the man back since no one was around, “My good friend, why are you carrying a maiden’s belongings, is there a story behind this?”

Wen Kexing, who was carefully removing the bloodstained fabric from the open wound, immediately tore the clothes with more force after hearing that, face blank. Zhou Zishu let out an “Ow!”, grimacing. Only then did Wen Kexing answered in good spirits, “This is a personal gift from the famous courtesan and gentleman Su Yue from Yang Zhou City, you shouldn’t have asked if you don’t want to make an ignorant fool of yourself.”

Then he continued to tear Su Yue’s gift into pieces and used them to cover Zhou Zishu’s wound.

Zhou Zishu had no idea people from Jiangnan were that open-minded. He asked without thinking, because even back when the capital was thirty miles from the Wang Yue river and was ruled by that degenerate Emperor, the concept of a male courtesan was not heard of anywhere.

Wen Kexing looked at him with pity, “Were you born in utopia? Is everyone from Tian Chuang a country bumpkin? Or was my guess wrong?”

Zhou Zishu scoffed, “Never have I said that I...”

Before he could finish, Wen Kexing moved at lightning speed to dig at a major acupuncture point on his chest. If the target was at another place on his body and was covered by clothes, Zhou Zishu would not feel anything; but he was exhausted and the unruly Nails were acting up, so that very light attack was the last straw. He cried out, body bent over in pain, “You...”

Wen Kexing rubbed his chin, his tone knowing, “Your internal injuries are very serious, and seeing how capable you are, there’s no way Tian Chuang will let you go easily. But from what I heard, the deadly reputation of the Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns is no jokes; yet I see that you can still behave normally and run around in great spirits. Even if you act a little silly, that silliness definitely isn’t caused by the Nails. Did I really guess wrong after all?”

Zhou Zishu gritted out while sweating buckets, “Wen... Kexing, screw... screw your entire ancestors...”

Seeing that the man stopped putting on an act with all of his “blah blah blah Brother Wen whatever” nonsense, Wen Kexing felt accomplished even though he just got cursed at. He replied nonchalantly, “My ancestors are just dust now, I don’t even know their names, so that might be an impossible feat. Though, if you can remove your disguise, and under that is a stunning face, I’m perfectly willing to be a replacement for my forebears.”

Zhou Zishu was still gritting his teeth tightly, body wound up like a shrimp and trying his best to keep the Nails under control. At the other’s ramblings, he interrupted in irritation, “Would you shut the fuck up?”

Wen Kexing shut up immediately, crossing his arms and watching by the side with not a single ounce of guilt.

After an undecipherable amount of time, Zhou Zishu opened his bloodshot eyes. Even though outsiders could not see what his real expression was, it was clearly not pleasant, “It’s morning now.”

The Nails had calmed down, which signified dawn—they had been trapped in this strange cave for an entire night.

Wen Kexing was not anxious either. He nodded at that, “Seems like whoever lured you here—possibly on purpose—really wants you dead.”

“Whoever lured you.” Zhou Zishu replied.

“It’s obviously you, I’m a good person.” Wen Kexing wouldn’t admit defeat.

Zhou Zishu ignored him, grasping at the wall to stand up. He leaned on it and started calculating the way to escape. Wen Kexing asked by his side, “Aren’t you afraid, Zhou Xu?”

“I am,” Zhou Zishu replied.

Wen Kexing stared at him, slightly surprised. Zhou Zishu continued very seriously, “I haven’t gathered enough merits yet, if I enter Hell now, who knows what I’ll reincarnate into.”

Wen Kexing firmly said after some thought, “You definitely weren’t a good person before, then.”

He didn’t wait for Zhou Zishu’s reply, “If that’s the case, isn’t it too late to start merit gathering now?”

Zhou Zishu straightened his back and walked toward a direction, “Why? Haven’t you heard of the saying ‘the second you drop the knife is when you become Buddha’?”

Wen Kexing chased after him, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to eat dog meat,” Zhou Zishu said, “That person only traps us here...”

“Traps you.” Wen Kexing corrected.

Zhou Zishu glanced at him with contempt, continuing, “That beast’s head is quite hefty, feasting on that is enough for us to last a few days. Without it there’re still the underwater creatures, so we definitely won’t starve. Doesn’t matter who that person dressed in black is, they’ll show themselves eventually.”

Wen Kexing said in horror, “You were afraid of the dirty river water just yesterday, and now you want to eat those things that live in it?”

“And are you going to starve yourself to death and let those things eat you instead?” Zhou Zishu replied and concluded, “How saintly of you, Brother Wen.”

The light couldn’t reach the cave, but fortunately Zhou Zishu brought with him some lighters since he planned on escaping in the night. There was also a luminous pearl that he stole from the riches; the pearl was small but it was enough for them to move around. The faint light cast over half of his face; and Wen Kexing saw not the unpleasant features, but very bright eyes that were directed at him, carrying an indescribable hint of playfulness.

That look was somewhat familiar.

Wen Kexing thought long and hard about it, but he couldn't remember which beauty those eyes belonged to, so he stayed silent.

In the moment when both of them said nothing, Zhou Zishu's ears caught the sound of a breath that was neither his nor Wen Kexing's. He smiled—as expected, someone was not feeling very patient right now.

He then stood by the river and bent down to wash his hands, killing another monster that was sneakily attacking in the process. He lifted it up and threw it on the ground; the creature's neck broke and it drew its last breath without even making a sound. Zhou Zishu scooped up the water and drank leisurely.

Wen Kexing—a carefree hoodlum himself—stared at his companion thoughtfully before using the tip of his toe to kick the corpse away and drank the river water like the other.

At that moment, a blade of wind came at them from behind. Wen Kexing dodged it by stepping aside, seemingly predicted it as he looked calm. A blade grazed his robes and fell into the water with a “Splash!”. Zhou Zishu laughed, his arms crossed as he stood to one side to enjoy the fun, “See, Brother Wen, didn't I say that they're after you? And you're definitely not the good type either, seeing that they devote this much effort to deal with you.”

There were blades coming at him from every direction of the cave; those blades completely went past Zhou Zishu to charge at Wen Kexing, creating a maze of weapons—but Wen Kexing didn't struggle at all, his qinggong so much more skillful than Zhou Zishu had estimated.

Internally, though, he was cursing—this Zhou person was such a vengeful and petty one; not only was he not good, he was utterly contemptible.

Wen Kexing lifted his arm to bat away another blade, which brushed Zhou Zishu's pants and planted itself on the ground. “Is leaving one to sink or swim your way of gathering merits, my beautiful Zhou?”

Chapter 14 - Escape

Zhou Zishu looked him over before replying unhurriedly, “I don’t see how you’re near death.”

He hadn’t finished when Wen Kexing, as if responding, cried out in pain with his back bent. One of the blades pierced through his body to the hilt; and his face went pale as he could only utter, “You...”

Zhou Zishu was initially shocked, but soon enough he rushed toward the opposite direction. In the corner was a fleeting shadow which caught Zhou Zishu’s eyes thanks to the incredibly narrow path. The shadow was unable to dodge his attack in time, and they coughed up blood which stained their whole mask. They staggered back a few steps, but still had it in them to get back on their feet and run.

There was an “Oh” from Zhou Zishu as he realized the pine cone last time didn’t stop them not because he didn’t put enough strength into it; but rather because this one was good at being a punching bag.

All of a sudden, a ghostly figure appeared from nowhere to grab at the person’s neck, propping them against the wall.

The man in black said in horror, “You...”

Wen Kexing tilted his head and smiled, his other arm raised. The blade, which was held under his arm pit, fell to the ground. His clothes didn’t suffer a single scratch.

Zhou Zishu spoke in a lethargic manner, “Did you really believe his hoax? This is the first time I’ve seen a killer this dumb.”

At that, Wen Kexing looked at him thoughtfully. “It’s not that he’s awful, your eyes are just way too sharp, my friend. If you aren’t injured, he might...”

He cut himself off right there and shook his head, strengthening his grip on the black-clothed man’s neck. There was a gurgling sound from his throat while his eyes shone with unspeakable fear. Wen Kexing felt his upper body with his other hand and hummed, “Gold-threaded armor... This is some good stuff, a shame that it’s wasted on you.”

The man forced out broken words with great difficulty, “Mas... ‘s... m...”

Wen Kexing’s lips curled, and with a “Crack!”, the man convulsed and went still.

Zhou Zishu watched his companion killing off this person without any interrogating, his eyes darkened a little. He took one step back and leaned onto the wall, arms crossed while thinking about something.

Wen Kexing removed the man's mask to completely reveal his identity. He looked around forty with a small physique and high, cruel cheekbones; on his right cheek was a big red birthmark. His eyes were small, his nose was big, and he had buck teeth.

Wen Kexing commented after examining, "Seeing how he looks, he deserves to die after all."

Then he raised his head to smile at Zhou Zishu, "Do you agree, Brother Zhou?"

Zhou Zishu replied, "You're so full of nonsense."

Wen Kexing held up his arms in a gesture of appreciation, "I'm very incredibly honored that you thought of me so."

Zhou Zishu laughed mockingly and went past him to look at the body. There were many burning questions inside him, such as: How did the famous Golden Armor, which disappeared from jianghu many years ago, end up in this person's hand? Was this one the true Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost? How were those underwater creatures made? Were they human?

He undressed the corpse in a blink of an eye and found a daunting tattoo of a ghost face on his back. Zhou Zishu paused; he could be no one else but one of the Ghosts.

The Hanged? Hanged Ghost Xue Fang apparently had buck teeth?

Ugh... This isn't right, and Zhou Zishu immediately abandoned this very Wen Kexing-like train of thought. Were those the actual Ghosts that chased after him and Zhang Chengling along the way? Impossible—the Ghosts of Qingzhu Ridge couldn't possibly make a name for themselves if that was all they could do.

Why did the Hanged Ghost want to kill Yu Tianjie? And was the person who went the other way the Delighted Mourning Ghost?

The act of killing renowned figures on the outskirts of the Zhao's Holdings was a direct confirmation that they were the ones responsible for the Zhang family massacre, what good would it bring the Ghost Valley?

And... He looked up at an amiable Wen Kexing, questioning him suddenly, "Didn't Brother Wen proclaim that you'd never murdered anyone ever since you left home? Why went against that just now?"

Wen Kexing glared. "He wanted to end me first; if I hadn't been smart and clever enough, I would've died under those blades."

Zhou Zishu smiled, “Were you also adamant that this disaster would never befall you, Mister Good-hearted Wen?”

Wen Kexing replied with sense, “Look at this one and the ghost face on his back; then look at the young man we found—he lost his head before he could even get hitched! Don’t you see? It proves the fact that this man was of the extremely vile sort, did he need a reason to take the life of a good-hearted one?”

Zhou Zishu looked at him, not saying anything.

Wen Kexing shook his head, voice full of conviction, “How sad for an adult like you to be completely ignorant of such principles; I can’t even imagine how you grew up.”

Zhou Zishu was silent for a good while. Then he spat out, “Grateful for the education.”

Wen Kexing was quick to reply, “It’s nothing at all, don’t be so formal.”

Zhou Zishu looked down, back to searching the body. While he was removing the armor, a small pouch fell out from the area near the chest. He carefully took it off, and found a sparkling piece of lapis lazuli inside. It was as big as the palm of his hand and meticulously crafted, seemingly engraved with patterns.

He held up a broken piece to examine it under the light, “Lapis?”

There was an “Ah” from Wen Kexing as he took a closer look and received it from the other with both hands, as if he was afraid of breaking it. “No wonder he wore the Golden Armor, I would have done the same if this was in my possession.”

Zhou Zishu was curious at the other man’s serious attitude. “What is it?” He couldn’t help but ask.

Wen Kexing replied, “This looks like one of the five pieces that make up the legendary Lapis Armor... I thought them to be rumors, but seems like they’re real after all. It’s said that once you gather all five pieces, you will rule over the entire pugilist scene in Zhong Yuan no matter who you are. Some say those pieces have the guide to the greatest martial art style hidden within them; some say they hide a map instead, and when you follow the directions it will lead you to the object of your dreams and desires.”

He put it back in Zhou Zishu’s palm somewhat reluctantly, curling the other’s fingers around it. “It’s the good stuff.” He said softly.

Zhou Zishu nodded in understanding, then immediately batting Wen Kexing’s hand away. He put the piece of lapis back into the pouch and carelessly threw it aside

to continue searching the Hanged Ghost's body. After turning the corpse over and over and finding nothing else, he stood up with a frown, "Well, this is troublesome. How do we get out now?"

He stared down upon the still-sitting Wen Kexing, continuing in annoyance, "I'm asking you, Mister "Good Person" Wen! You killed this man way too quickly, do you want us to dig our way out like mice?"

Wen Kexing pointed to the lapis, "You... don't you want that?"

Zhou Zishu replied with a solemn face, "If the completed piece is made of real lapis then it does worth a fortune, but there is only one part of it here so it's entirely useless. Not even the pawn shop would take this thing."

At that, Wen Kexing laughed softly and stood up. He followed Zhou Zishu while asking, "Seeing how cautious Brother Zhou is, why won't you believe in the rumors? Don't you have any wishes or desires?"

Zhou Zishu didn't bother to look back. "There is no such thing as a free lunch; and even you don't want it yourself, so why must I? Don't you have desires too, charitable Brother Wen?"

Wen Kexing turned his head away at that, carefully putting the pouch in his chest pocket. "What if I want it?" He asked.

Zhou Zishu glanced at him, then replied, "Ah."

And nothing else.

They walked back and forth in the cave, revisiting both the spot from where they jumped down and the entrance with blades sticking out. Zhou Zishu felt the wall surrounding them with his hands, "This gate closed when we tried to get out, so at that time the Hanged Ghost was definitely near. The controlling mechanism might be around this spot too."

But they were both completely clueless about divination, so the search was fruitless. The seven nails started to stir slightly, informing Zhou Zishu that it was nearing midnight again. Another full day had passed with them trapped under here, and considering that he was in a worse condition than before, eating that dog-like beast might be inevitable.

While they were thinking hard, all of a sudden, a faint voice could be heard from somewhere far away from the cave entrance, "Hurry up, I found this place, let me call out to them— Master! Master! Can you listen to me... Master, are you still breathing? If you are, I'm gonna dig you out of this grave; but if you want to go see the King of Hell, I won't bother you!"

It was Gu Xiang!

For some unknown reasons, after being chased by a big dog, bitten by a monster, terrified by the Hanged Ghost's appearance; Zhou Zishu felt incredibly grateful for her voice.

Gu Xiang continued to whisper, "Did you not hear me or are you dead already? Master, I'm gonna leave for real if you don't speak up!"

Only then did Wen Kexing speak up leisurely. "Ah-Xiang, do you know what happens to girls who talk too much and do nothing?"

This seems to be a special kungfu of delivering sounds. Zhou Zishu had seen it from the other man several times; no matter where he was or how quiet he talked, he could make his target hear what he said very clearly.

Gu Xiang made a whining sound, urging someone, "Hurry up, didn't you hear Master telling me to do more and talk less? Let's get him out of there."

The sound of grave digging started afterward.

Zhou Zishu suddenly realized: Rather than not doing much, Gu Xiang just didn't do anything at all.

It took nearly four hours to dig them out, like digging out two big turnips.

Beside Gu Xiang was a crowd of men who looked like regular workers. She shouted, "Look! They're crawling out!"

Zhou Zishu didn't want to get out anymore at her words.

Wen Kexing remained calm, making his way out with his face full of dirt and grime. He glanced at Gu Xiang, ordering her, "You can shut up now."

Gu Xiang stuck out her tongue, making an ugly face at Zhou Zishu's direction.

A "worker" walked towards them and formally greeted Wen Kexing, "Master, we're late."

Gu Xiang cut in, "We actually saw the marks you left behind long ago, but the Zhaos made quite a ruckus since there were two mysterious deaths going on, and all those cowards who came here after that stalled our progress—how did you two end up like this, anyway?"

Wen Kexing replied, "We saw a laughing owl."

Zhou Zishu glanced at every other direction at once, like being dragged into this was the last thing he wanted.

“Huh?” Gu Xiang asked confusedly.

Wen Kexing explained, “A laughing owl signifies incoming misfortune, including death. That’s why we had to hide underground, that way the ghosts will think that we’re already dead and they will leave us be.”

“Oh!” Gu Xiang exclaimed in enlightenment.

Wen Kexing patted her head, continuing shamelessly, “Mm-hm, bear it in mind, it may save your life one day.”

Then he looked over to the worker-dressed man. “Old Meng, these clothes don’t suit you at all. Dress like a butcher next time.”

Old Meng replied dutifully, “Yes, Master.”

Wen Kexing waved his hand, “Go, we don’t need everyone gathering here and making people think that we’re a gang of criminals.”

Old Meng whistled, and the rest disappeared into thin air in a very organized fashion, their traces completely vanishing.

Zhou Zishu also said goodbye, but Wen Kexing told him, “Brother Zhou, how about I follow you?”

Zhou Zishu used silence to proclaim his objection, only for Wen Kexing to continue, “I’m a good man, so I can teach you the art of merit gathering on the way.”

Zhou Zishu remained silent.

Gu Xiang, currently watching this staring contest, felt like the atmosphere had gone very strange. Eventually, Wen Kexing delivered the killing blow, “And I’m gonna follow you whether you want me to or not.”

There was a stiff smile on Zhou Zishu’s face as he replied, “Then be my guest, Brother Wen.”

Looking at Zhou Zishu, Gu Xiang finally understood what the saying “a mule is only obedient when it received a beating”⁵⁷ was all about. As for when she looked at

⁵⁷ The idiom is used for people who are stupidly stubborn and only harsh treatment will make them conform to something.

Wen Kexing, she finally knew how a person could be so unabashed they would put the rest of the world to shame. She followed the two men, feeling extremely proud of herself for learning so much in just one night.

Chapter 15 - Tavern

“Master, how are you so sure that once a person wears a disguise, it has to be uglier than how they normally are?” Gu Xiang asked.

Wen Kexing drawled, “No matter how ugly or beautiful people look, the features they were born with have a harmonious quality to them. Once tweakings are made, it’s impossible to not slip and make a mistake; and if you make yourself to be more beautiful, there will be more eyes on you, thus exposing those mistakes even more easily, understand?”

The three of them were walking on the main road that was full of people in the middle of noon. Zhou Zishu maintained his energy well by staying mute during the other two’s conversation and ignoring Wen Kexing’s occasional secret looks thrown his way; but at those words, he couldn’t help his surprise. This man sure knows a lot, he glanced at Wen Kexing and thought.

Being the center of attention gave a boost to Wen Kexing’s ego as he continued to ramble on. “The art of disguise is vast with varying methods. Some paint over their face – this method requires fastidiousness as the smallest inconsistency will out them. Some craft a human skin-like mask; this one is way more effective and harder to detect if the disguiser is good at his job.” He spared a quick look at Zhou Zishu at that.

Gu Xiang immediately applied what she had been taught by feeling Zhou Zishu’s face with her fingers. Her hands were soft, and around her sleeves was a refreshing fragrant that could only belong to a young maiden. Zhou Zishu made no attempt to dodge; instead he only laughed and let her do what she wanted. No one knew who was taking advantage of who at this point.

He asked softly and patiently after a while, “Have you found anything?”

Gu Xiang’s expression was full of doubt, she looked back to Wen Kexing skeptically, “Master, I still feel like it’s real...”

Wen Kexing replied, “Of course he won’t wear a human skin mask, that thing leaves no room for the skin under to breathe. He would have to remove it after a certain amount of time, which is why I’m sticking to him, to see if he will do it.”

There was idolization on Gu Xiang’s face. “So you wasted this much time fooling around just because you want an answer to that.”

Wen Kexing pointed at Zhou Zishu, “If he is a beauty, I’m definitely not wasting anything.”

After mulling things over, Zhou Zishu decided he could stay silent no longer. “Since when was I fooling around with you?”

Wen Kexing answered unhurriedly, “Not now, but you definitely will in the future.”

Then he also reached out to touch Zhou Zishu’s face. “That time when I touched the skin on your shoulder, the feeling was different...”

Zhou Zishu batted his hand away as he stepped back. Wen Kexing raised his brows in discontent, pointing at Gu Xiang, “How can she touch you but I can’t?”

Zhou Zishu casually fixed his torn sleeves. “If you can look like her, I’m willing to strip off everything so you can touch however much you like.”

Gu Xiang once thought Zhou Zishu was a poor beggar who was too unfortunate to have run into her Master and even sympathized with him; but after that reply she realized they were just birds of a same damn feather, no wonder they flocked together.

She could only hope now that they had each other to mess around and fight their energy away with, they would cause less disaster for the world.

Wen Kexing turned to judge Gu Xiang with an unreadable face. Then his voice dropped, “Ah-Xiang, you can get lost now.”

There was a “Huh?” from Gu Xiang as she blinked innocently. “You want me to be off to where?”

Wen Kexing crossed his arms, really wishing to see her no more. “This world is endless; except for Dong Ting, you can scam to wherever.”

Gu Xiang, after a good while of standing there foolishly, blurted out, “Are you jealous with me, Master?”

Wen Kexing glanced at her. Gu Xiang immediately understood and slapped herself, “Damn you, you stupid mouth, you stupid running mouth, how about...”

“Ah-Xiang.”

Gu Xiang walked away immediately with an “Aish”, continuing to ramble along the way. “Alright, alright, I’ll scam. Don’t worry Master, I’ll leave to the farthest place I can; a three-legged frog⁵⁸ may be hard to find but not a two-legged man! Never in my life would I dare to steal your men, Master, please, you two just be my guest, carry on with what you’re doing...”

She quickly disappeared from view, still prattling on.

⁵⁸ A popular symbol for prosperity and wealth.

Zhou Zishu watched this squabble between master and maid with interest, thinking back to the “except for Dong Ting” part, which seemed to carry a deeper meaning.

Once Gu Xiang left, Wen Kexing’s entire demeanor changed. He coughed pretentiously, extending his hand. “Can this one have the honor of having a meal with you, Brother Zhou?”

Even if I refuse, this person will tail me around anyway, Zhou Zishu thought, and if I agree he will pay for my food. He accepted the request quite cheerfully.

Wen Kexing led the way with the brightest face. Zhou Zishu did an internal introspection; back when he was a half-ghost flitting about the palace, wearing robes and doing murderous business in a mysterious place full of apricot blossoms, he might be brutal, but at least there was a grace to him as a cover.

Since when had he become unabashedly shameless?

He looked at Wen Kexing’s back and thought, a man is known by the company he keeps indeed.

They were starving when they reached the tavern, so all the dishes were consumed with silent efficiency; as if they were afraid they would miss a bite. Their chopsticks bumped occasionally and small fights ensued over chicken and pork.

One food admirer and one free meal enthusiast turned the table into a full-blown battle with heavy murderous atmosphere.

After winning one plate to himself, Wen Kexing smiled at Zhou Zishu while waiting for the next dish, “I’ve met my match, no wonder why this meal has become so much more delicious.”

Zhou Zishu looked at him scornfully. What are you, a chicken? Why all this fighting?

At that moment, there was a commotion on the lower floor. A waiter taunted loudly, “Hey, Young Master, you sure dress and behave well, why do you want to dine and dash? And the prepayment letter nonsense too, you must have heard too many stories. Which court scholar are you then? Are you a Principle Graduate⁵⁹ and if so, which examination did you ace in? And the calligraphy...”

The crowd around them laughed. Wen Kexing stuck his head out to look at the scene under them, rubbing his chin while whispering, “A beauty...”

⁵⁹ 状元 (zhuàngyuan) is the title for the person who scored first place during the examination to become court officials.

Zhou Zishu followed his gaze. Downstairs was a flustered young man wearing dark blue clothes, a xiao⁶⁰ by his hip. His clothes didn't stand out at first glance, but when one took a closer look, the materials were incredibly exquisite. The jade xiao was also finely crafted; even if he wasn't an expert, he knew it must have cost a fortune. Zhou Zishu felt a sense of familiarity in the way he dressed and laughed quietly.

Wen Kexing asked, "What are you laughing at?"

"He tries to dress inconspicuously but ends up doing a terrible job of it. He reminds me of someone I knew."

While they were talking, the ignorant young man surrounded by the crowd looked up, his eyes glossing over them. Zhou Zishu shook his head; he surely must be of the most distinguished nobility. Someone well-versed in dissipated behaviors would never have that doe-eyed look to him. "Brother Wen, your chance for merit gathering has come."

Wen Kexing—initially watching his companion's expression—was startled at that, hand rummaging in his chest pocket. "Yeah, you have a point, it's a must to aid a beauty in need... Hm?"

He stopped dead in his track, face strange, "Brother Wen."

"Huh?"

"I was thinking, how about you do it instead?" Wen Kexing smiled awkwardly, "I myself have done a lot in my lifetime, there's no need to steal your moment..."

Zhou Zishu beamed at him.

After a few seconds, Wen Kexing sighed, shoulders sagging. "Back when we were on the street, I helped a dashing man when he tripped and fell, he even smiled at me too... Hah, how could I ever know that a person with such charm turned out to be a thief?"

Zhou Zishu raised his brows, deciding that he should be even more shameless; he would not be beaten by this person. His mind made up, he conveniently tugged at Wen Kexing's sleeves to wipe his hand on them, then took out a silver ingot from his chest and threw it downstairs without any strength. It hit the increasingly offensive waiter on the head; the man was going to yell at whoever did that but his anger vanished once he picked up the object and realized it was shiny silver.

⁶⁰ An end-blown flute.

He heard Zhou Zishu's lazy drawl, "Put him on my tab."

Naturally, the waiter shut up, his head lowered with words of affirmation. The young man in blue clothes immediately looked at Zhou Zishu gratefully and went upstairs to thank the other in person.

Zhou Zishu pointed at the table that was now empty of food and said to Wen Kexing, "Saving him is on me, this meal is on you. Write that down, you owe me three silver liangs⁶¹ now."

Wen Kexing spoke in a small voice, "Can I use my body to pay back the debt?"

Zhou Zishu smiled, unruffled. "Sorry, my taste is not that refined yet."

The young man had reached where they were sitting. Both hid away their sneaky smiles and displayed the most heroic demeanor possible. The young man bowed deeply, "My name is Cao Weining, please receive this gesture as my token of deepest gratitude for your help."

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu both spoke at the same time, "It's nothing, Young Master Cao, there's no need to be so formal."

They glanced at each other meaningfully afterwards, basking in the peculiarity of the situation.

Zhou Zishu coughed and looked away first. "Please sit, Young Master Cao. My name is Zhou Xu, and this one is..."

"Wen Kexing." The other smiled and nodded. He sat quietly and a bit distantly from them, his behaviors the perfect image of a gentleman.

After thanking them, Cao Weining sat down without a doubt. He was a closed-door disciple⁶² from Qing Feng Sword Sect and this was his first time experiencing life in jianghu. He got separated from his Uncle-Master and unknowingly ran into a thief, which was why he was in this embarrassing situation. He was well and truly clueless about what to do until Zhou Zishu's rescue; consequently, he deemed this person to be such a righteous individual, even his sickly face didn't seem that grotesque at all to him.

Taking advantage of situations was Zhou Zishu's strongest point; his skills worked on everyone except for Wen Kexing. Only a few sentences into the conversation and Cao Weining already felt like they were the closest of comrades as he started telling the other everything possible. "My Uncle-Master and I are attending the gathering in

⁶¹ An unit of currency, one liang equals 50 grams.

⁶² The most highly-regarded disciple under a Master.

Dong Ting, but a few days ago something awful happened back at the Zhao's Holdings. My Uncle and Sir Zhao knew each other way back, so he told me to go to Dong Ting first to apologize to Sir Gao Chong for being late..."

"Dong Ting's gathering?" Zhou Zishu was surprised.

"Yes." Cao Weining explained, "Has Brother Zhou heard about the Zhang family tragedy? Not only that, I heard a few days ago the Patriarch of Tai Shan died mysteriously in his own room along with all of his disciples in one single night, in a fashion not unlike the Zhangs. The lucky Zhang Young Master who survived is now with the Zhaos and under Sir Zhao's protection; he confirmed that the Ghosts of Qingzhu Ridge were behind this. This gathering at Dong Ting is summoned by Sir Gao using his Realm's Command, aiming to gather all the heroes in the world to extinguish the Ghost Valley."

On instinct, Zhou Zishu glanced at Wen Kexing—only to find the man deeply invested in the conversation. He even asked, "Is this real?"

"Absolutely." Cao Weining replied. "Uncle and I are under my Master's order to attend."

Sure enough, this youngling was someone experiencing real life for the first time; he answered questions he wasn't even asked.

Wen Kexing said, "Isn't gathering merits your goal, Brother Zhou? How about accompanying this young friend; battling evils is surely one of the biggest virtues out there."

Zhou Zishu took a sip of wine with his eyes downcast, unsure about Wen Kexing's motives. Cao Weining clapped his hands, "Indeed it is, that was very well-said of you, Brother Wen. I think you two are very righteous and honorable and that we can be great friends, so why don't you come with me to Dong Ting?"

Hah, this foolish kid.

Wen Kexing smiled, "That'd be our honor."

Chapter 16 - Spirit Fox

Henceforth, the duo turned into a trio. Dong Ting was one of Zhou Zishu's destinations regardless, so he had no objections.

There was a type of people who lived their life in such normality, it would only cause headaches for them to be forced to think outside of the box – an example of this would be Cao Weining. Additionally, there was another type who couldn't help but look deeper into everything and anything, confusing themselves with many possibilities before they could even realize it – an example of this would be Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing went back to their usual routine of trading quips and insults back and forth with unending enthusiasm, trying to probe the other incessantly.

Cao Weining, after listening to them confusedly, gave the final conclusion: "You two have such an admirable camaraderie."

Zhou Zishu shut up, glancing at Cao Weining in complete silence. He knew the Patriarch of Qing Feng Sword Sect was an old sly fox, how on earth did that man manage to raise an innocent rabbit like this one?

Wen Kexing unabashedly took advantage of that to wrap his arms around Zhou Zishu's shoulders, smiling at Cao Weining, "Thank you, Young Master Cao. In fact, I have made up my mind that in this lifetime I will marry no one else but Brother Zhou."

Cao Weining's mouth was as wide open as his eyes.

Zhou Zishu shot back, being used to it already, "I'm afraid I have to let Brother Wen down. With my incurable illness, I won't live on for much longer; what good will it do to bind yourself to this slowly dying soul?"

Wen Kexing replied seriously, "If you're gone, I will remain solitary 'till the end of my life."

Zhou Zishu's words carried daggers. "For a great mind to suffer loneliness is often destiny, who am I to tamper with it?"

Wen Kexing was undaunted, "Come on, don't be too humble Ah-Xu, that's way too polite of you."

Zhou Zishu quickly waved his hands, "Not at all, why would I be."

Cao Weining's gaze went back and forth between the two of them. When he came back to his senses, he blurted out a question. "...Is it Brother Zhou's illness that is obstructing your feelings for each other?"

After a short moment of silence, Wen Kexing burst out laughing, feeling very fond of Cao Weining.

Zhou Zishu coughed after a good while, removing Wen Kexing's arms that were around his neck and replying with a solemn face. "Brother Cao need not think too much into it, the closest that I and Brother Wen can become is an estranged pair."

Cao Weining frowned, thinking the other was trying to delude himself. "A person like Brother Zhou should not suffer like this," he said in sorrow.

Zhou Zishu smiled back bitterly, "Thank you Brother Cao, but I don't feel the slightest..."

"My master is acquainted with some peculiar figures in jianghu, fortunately a few of them are from Shaman Medicine Valley. It'd be wonderful if Brother Zhou can come with me back home after dealing with matters concerning the unorthodox sects, my master definitely possesses means that can help you."

Zhou Zishu was "moved to tears", so he kept his mouth shut.

Unexpectedly, Cao Weining was a true man of action, so he immediately made a fist-palm salute, "Wait for me at the inn, I will go send a message to my Uncle."

He turned around and left right after. Wen Kexing praised, "How enthusiastic, truly a man who can be my match."

He turned his head to Zhou Zishu studying him somewhat pensively. Wen Kexing paused, then asked, "What is it? Did my passionate words earlier manage to reach Ah-Xu's heart after all? Are you planning to reciprocate with your body?"

Zhou Zishu smiled coldly, "Forgive me, but I feel like... Brother Wen's motives behind going to Dong Ting are quite puzzling."

Wen Kexing turned serious, "Helping people in need and being generous are only small virtues, do you what bigger virtues are?"

Zhou Zishu narrowed his eyes, staring at the other man without a word.

Wen Kexing replied slowly. "A day with an empty Hell is a day further from ascending; good and evil has always been impossible to coexist ever since ancient time, don't you think?" When he said this, his calm gaze was directed at somewhere

far away, revealing his handsome side profile. His usual playful demeanor was gone without a trace, and he looked like an expressionless Buddha stone statue.

“This is the mortal world,” he continued, “and in the mortal world, monsters shouldn’t exist. That... respectable and virtuous Sir Gao Chong wants to extinguish evils for the sake of everyone, if I don’t lend him a hand, all the years of reading holy books will go to waste. It’s said that only after years and years of cultivation is one able to land in this realm, it will be for nothing if they don’t make a mark for themselves.”

Zhou Zishu still stayed silent. Wen Kexing looked back at him. “What do you think, Ah-Xu?”

After a long while, Zhou Zishu laughed softly. “Brother Wen speaks as if you are a true gentleman.”

Wen Kexing didn’t answer straight to the point. “There are three types of people in this world: The ones who can eat meat, ones who don’t mind it, and ones who can’t stand it; this is how they are born to be, but isn’t it hilarious if the first type is born into poverty and the third type is born into luxury?”

Zhou Zishu, after a bout of stillness, spoke leisurely and carefully, “Brother Wen talks about such mysteries that I’m unable to understand; however, I do know one thing.”

“And what is it?”

“One won’t stay unchanged once thrust into a different situation.”

Wen Kexing was startled at that for a few seconds. Then he laughed out loud, unconstrained, to the point of tearing up. Zhou Zishu watched him, expressions remaining the same, his sickly skin not betraying any emotions. His eyelids lowered, and he looked like he wanted to search deep inside Wen Kexing’s soul.

After an unknown amount of time, Wen Kexing stood upright again, breathing hard, hands wiping the tears at the corner of his eyes. “Ah-Xu, I’ve found out that you are the first person in my entire lifetime that suits my taste the most... You know, I am actually a little knowledgeable in the art of disguise too.”

He looked at Zhou Zishu without blinking, to the point that even the fake layer of skin on his face felt uncomfortable. He answered without thinking, “Are you really?”

Wen Kexing said with absolute sincerity, “Therefore maybe I will transform myself into Gu Xiang.”

Zhou Zishu stood there in a daze. When he saw that Wen Kexing was looking at him up and down crudely, he immediately recomposed himself, turning to head towards the inn without a word.

Wen Kexing stared after his back, his gaze drawn to the shoulder blades hidden under clothes. To him, even when the other man was dressing in rags and looked dejected in his own misery, there was always an indescribable aura that he exuded. It took him back to that afternoon with the brilliant sun, when Zhou Zishu closed his eyes and leaned onto the wall by the main street, his beggar-like demeanor looking more relaxed than anyone else in this world.

But Wen Kexing knew that he was only sunbathing.

How can such a man not be a stunning beauty? Wen Kexing thought smugly. During the near thirty years he had lived, he had never been wrong about that.

Seeing that Zhou Zishu was now far away, Wen Kexing hurried after him, mumbling under his breath, “How can one ever know if they will change? And whether one is averse to meat or not, won’t it be miserable anyway if they’re thrown into a desolate place with nothing else to devour?”

At night fall, Cao Weining caught up to them. He felt the atmosphere between the other two had become strange, so he asked cautiously, “Did Brother Zhou and Brother Wen... have a quarrel?”

“Don’t think too much into it, Brother Cao.” They replied at the same time—again.

Wen Kexing narrowed his eyes at Zhou Zishu, his gaze sharp and full of tease. Zhou Zishu feigned ignorance.

Cao Weining scratched his head. “Actually... I don’t know how to word this, but yes, I have heard of such a thing before, but never in my life have I seen it with real men...”

Wen Kexing looked at him silently, so he continued hurriedly, “Please don’t be mistaken, Brother Wen, I don’t mean anything else, although it is a little difficult to take in, but you are both very chivalrous individuals... It’s a little strange, but...” he coughed, “please don’t take my words seriously, we always have to act and speak proper...”

Zhou Zishu poured a cup of wine for himself leisurely and took a few sips. Silly boy is getting his words tangled up, he thought.

Cao Weining then lowered his head and only looked up after a good while, his face red and his voice small, “So... do you two want separate rooms or just one room?”

Zhou Zishu choked on his wine.

Even Wen Kexing had to stare at Cao Weining and thought, We’ve found a treasure of a boy, haven’t we.

The atmosphere among the three turned weird; no one spoke, only Zhou Zishu was making coughing sounds. But suddenly, there was a piercing scream from the upper floor, making the few guests downstairs raise their heads. They saw the waiter stumbled down like he had just seen a ghost, his voice quivering, “A mur... mur... murder!”

Cao Weining’s face was all serious as he grabbed his sword and head upstairs. There was a pair of man and woman who did this at the same time; they dressed neatly and looked like brother and sister. There were always people who couldn’t stop themselves from worrying about others’ business. Wen Kexing kicked at Zhou Zishu with his foot. “Ah-Xu, won’t you go check it out?”

Zhou Zishu stood up and lowered his upper body, “You first.”

Wen Kexing rushed upstairs. When he was passing by Zhou Zishu, he suddenly slowed down and got closer, his voice low, “If you spend the night with me, I will turn into Gu Xiang as you wish.”

“I’m really honored, but I’d rather sleep in the stable.”

Wen Kexing clicked his tongue, glancing at the other, “You’re no fun.” Zhou Zishu followed close behind him.

The moment they reached the second floor, the smell of blood was right in their face. The door to the room was wide open. Cao Weining stood there with a grave expression, turning to beckon the two forward once he saw them. “You should come look at this person.”

Zhou Zishu walked toward him and saw a man propped up by the bedpost, his clothes in a state of sloppiness, revealing his chest—on it was a black mark in the shape of a hand. His arms were cut off and thrown into a corner, blood splattering everywhere. The corpse’s head lolled to one side, eyes unfocused, face pale. It was evident that he had been dead for a while.

Wen Kexing was ooh-ing and aah-ing. “This one looks like... the thief who crashed into me the other day.”

Cao Weining also let out an “Ah!” and looked closer at the dead body, his expression complicated, “He... he also looks like the one who crashed into me!”

The two men who shared the same fate and had to rely on Zhou Zishu for help stared at each other, feeling a deep sense of solidarity.

Then they heard the girl beside them spoke, “I know this person, he’s Fang Buzhi, the Nine-Claw Spirit Fox!”

Chapter 17 - Lapis

Cao Weining asked in a stupor. “He... He’s that deplorable thief Fang Buzhi?”

The young maiden nodded, pointing at the corpse’s left hand. “It is said that Fang Buzhi is a man in his thirties and has a deformed left hand. There is also an unconfirmed rumor that...”

Her face went pink as she stopped there.

Zhou Zishu studied the body’s face and clean-shaven chin. He continued in her stead, “Also, there is a rumor that Fang Buzhi has another deformity on his body. Should our young lady feel uncomfortable, it is better that you go outside first or turn your back to us. Removing his pants will confirm whether he is the legendary thief or not.”

The girl glanced at her male companion in embarrassment. He coughed lightly, “Xiaolian, you should go.”

She went outside and waited by the door, her back facing the room.

The moment she turned away, Wen Kexing expertly stripped down the dead’s trousers to reveal that a particular part of the body had been cut off. He rubbed his chin in thought. “So it is him, no wonder I couldn’t feel anything out of the ordinary when he touched before.”

Unwavering and completely unbothered, he continued to remove Fang Buzhi’s clothes entirely and searched around. He found his money pouch among a big pile of assorted items and opened it, overjoyed when he found out nothing had been lost. With perfect contentment, he put it back in his chest pocket, not forgetting to tell Cao Weining politely, “Brother Cao, come over here and see if your things are still here.”

Cao Weining and the other young man stared at him, dumbstruck.

Zhou Zishu reminded him with a cold tone. “The dead is more important right now, Mister Charitable Wen.” He ignored the stranger’s approving look, adding, “Can you pay me back now?”

Wen Kexing’s face was full of grief. “We already belong to each other, why are you still hagglng over that?”

As the young man’s expression became even more entertaining, Zhou Zishu gripped Wen Kexing’s collar and threw the nuisance of a man aside. He squatted down to examine the body from head to toe, then frowned afterwards and concluded, “He died after a single blow. The attack went through his body from chest to back; clearly the result of the Raksha Palm.”

The stranger exclaimed, “You’re talking about the Delighted Mourning Ghost’s Raksha Palm?”

“I’m afraid so.” Zhou Zishu nodded, covering the body. He turned to the girl outside the door. “You can come in now, young miss.”

The man sized them up, then made a salute, “My name is Deng Kuan, disciple of Gao Chong, and this is my junior-apprentice sister Gao Xiaolian. We were travelling to accumulate experience, but a few days ago a message was received from my Master, so we had to rush back before Dong Ting’s gathering. How may I address you?”

Cao Weining hurried to answer. “Ah, many apologies for our tactlessness, it is an honor to meet you, Young Sir Deng. And surely this young miss must be Sir Gao’s daughter? My name is Cao Weining from Qing Feng Sword Sect, currently following my Patriarch’s order to attend Dong Ting. My Uncle will also be there soon enough, and on the way I ran into this... this thief master. It was fortunate of me to have been assisted by Brother Zhou and Brother Wen here.”

Deng Kuan said, “Then from where do you two brave...”

Zhou Zishu, still squatting, turned to him at that and smiled. “You overestimated our bravery. I’m called Zhou Xu, a mere spontaneous wanderer who belongs to no sects. As for that one...”

He pointed at Wen Kexing, pausing a little for dramatic effect. “He is Wen Kexing. He might look gentlemanly, but in truth he is a deeply experienced dirty hoodlum...”

Wen Kexing replied calmly, “I’ve only ever been teasing to you, Ah-Xu.”

Zhou Zishu’s voice was light. “And I’m glad I’m a priority.”

Gao Xiaolian’s attention was evidently no longer on the body. In contrast, Deng Kuan didn’t seem perturbed, only smiling back kindly with an attitude that was neither cowering nor arrogant – the manners of a true hero from the orthodox sects and someone who belonged to the leading force in Dong Ting. “How humorous of you two. If you come with Brother Cao to Dong Ting, then you are one of us—didn’t Brother Zhou say that this thief also died under the Raksha Palm of the Delighted Mourning Ghsot?”

He and Gao Xiaolian glanced at each other while Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing played dumb with their expression of ignorance. Cao Weining ended up asking, “Also? I heard that the outskirts of the Zhao’s Holdings was disturbed by the Ghosts, did they...”

Gao Xiaolian replied. “So Young Sir Cao did not know. A while before, a message was sent from Tai Hu, saying that Sir Mu Yunge of Duan Jian Manor – who was a guest of the Zhaos at that time – had been murdered by the Raksha Palm. The Ghosts of the Valley have caused numerous atrocities, how dare they be this arrogant.”

This place was not far from Dong Ting as it would take at most a day to get there – it wasn’t wrong to consider them already in Great Sir Gao’s domain. It was not clear whether this young lady was so worked up over justice or merely over the fact that there was someone intruding on her father’s territory.

Nonetheless, Deng Kuan and Cao Weining nodded on instinct, “Correct.” “Absolutely.”

Back when the pugilist scene formed the greatest alliance, there were three pieces of the Realm’s Command, each in the possession of a respectable figure. They could only be used in a time of great urgency; when the pieces were put together, a hero gathering could be held with the participants being anyone with talent and gallantry. One piece was in “Iron Judge” Gao Chong’s hands, one in the Shaolin Monastery’s,⁶³ and the last piece was rumored to belong to the reclusive hermit Monk Gu of Mount Ming.

It was quite unexpected for the unrest about the Ghost Valley to reach even the infamous Monk Gu – who was too engrossed in his cultivation endeavor to pay any attention to the outside world.

After Deng Kuan discussed with Cao Weining, they consulted the rest and decided to hire a carriage to deliver Fang Buzhi’s corpse to Gao Chong immediately in the night, preventing further complications.

Cao Weining and Deng Kuan seemed to have seen their match in each other; their first meeting seemed like that of old friends. Zhou Zishu stayed detached; he had no idea how Gao Chong was like as a person, but at least he had taught his disciples and daughter to be decent people. Gao Xiaolian walked beside them and chiming in at times, her tactfulness and manners a complete contrast to her youth. She was around the same age as Gu Xiang, but was in no way prone to being loud or conceited – an exemplary lady.

Wen Kexing suddenly sighed and lamented, “If only my Gu Xiang can learn something or two from Young Miss Gao.”

Gao Xiaolian smiled at him graciously, “Please don’t flatter me, Big Brother Wen.”

⁶³ A Buddhist temple teaching the Shaolin Martial Art. In wuxia fiction, Shaolin is often considered a separate sect.

Zhou Zishu scoffed, voice lowered, “Young lady Gao is Sir Gao’s daughter after all, and Gu Xiang... she’s a good kid, but it’s inevitable for her to not follow her superior’s footsteps.”

Wen Kexing’s face was entirely serious. “Ah-Xu, I’m only praising Miss Gao truthfully, you don’t have to get jealous...”

Gao Xiaolian immediately glanced at them in utter embarrassment and hurried ahead to catch up to Deng Kuan and Cao Weining, leaving Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing behind.

Zhou Zishu laughed softly. “Brother Wen, there is one matter that has been plaguing my mind – why was Fang Buzhi’s clothes in a disheveled state when we walked in? From what I know, good old Fang wasn’t the type to have a normal routine.”

Wen Kexing, using his hand to support his chin, turned things over in his mind for a few minutes then asked, “You mean the Delighted Mourning Ghost had taken a liking to Fang Buzhi and the latter struggled to fight off the former’s advances, so he killed his unattainable object of fancy in a fit of rage?”

He shook his head and sighed after that, “After all, it has always been inevitable for beauties to suffer.”

Zhou Zishu replied, his expression betraying nothing. “What an excellent explanation from Brother Wen, why did I ever think that the murderer must have killed Fang Buzhi for something on his body.”

Wen Kexing choked on his words briefly, pretending to agree. “Sounds reasonable enough.”

He turned his head to see Zhou Zishu looking at him meaningfully. The other man asked, “Did Brother Wen lose anything else that day beside from the pouch?”

Wen Kexing faced his eyes directly and confessed. “Yes. The money was intact, but the piece of Lapis Armor was nowhere to be found.”

The smile on Zhou Zishu’s face slowly receded, his eyes dark and cold as if submerged in ice. Wen Kexing looked innocent and smiley as usual.

After a good while, Zhou Zishu lowered his voice. “What are we to do about this, Mister Charitable Wen? You didn’t kill him, but he died because of you.”

Wen Kexing fell silent. At that moment ahead of them, Cao Wining and Deng Kuan were discussing Zhou Zishu’s illness. Deng Kuan turned around, about to ask if

he could manage traveling through the night and if they should hire another carriage for him, but he sensed a change of atmosphere between the two men.

Wen Kexing was no longer smiling, and there was an unreadable flash in Zhou Zishu's eyes. Deng Kuan felt puzzled and was going to inquire the two further when Wen Kexing suddenly laughed, his hand as quick as lightning gripping Zhou Zishu's chin as he leaned down and kissed him.

Deng Kuan stood there stunned, but educated as he was, he turned away awkwardly after a few minutes, feigning calmness at the dazed Gao Xiaolian and Cao Weining. "If... Then, us four should take steps in advance, let's do that..."

Too bad he miscalculated the moment he phased out.

When the three of them ditched without looking back, Zhou Zishu broke away from Wen Kexing's grip, ruthlessly delivering a punch to the other's abdomen, his expression cold. "The joke is not funny, Brother Wen."

Wen Kexing bent forward to clutch at his stomach, an unnerving hint of a smile still evident on his face. "I didn't kill him, but he died because of me? Have you considered that you're wrong, Ah-Xu?"

Zhou Zishu watched him icily.

Wen Kexing slowly straightened up. In the middle of the empty road at nighttime, his voice was low, almost like a sigh. "Inside the Lapis Armor is either the greatest martial art guide or a treasure from a rival country, who wouldn't want it?"

His mouth curled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Fang Buzhi didn't give a damn about what he stole – even if it's charity money – as long as it satisfied his greed, why wouldn't he want it? The Delighted Mourning Ghost was forced to enter the Valley for his crimes and lives a life that is half hell, so why wouldn't he want it? Why wouldn't you? You say you have to gather merits only because you don't want your past sins to come up once you're judged in the Underworld, and if there exists an object that can make you unbeatable and untouched by ghosts, why wouldn't you want it?"

Zhou Zishu shook his head slowly, scoffing. "I've never been afraid of ghosts knocking on my door."

He walked away briskly without looking back.

Wen Kexing watched his back, his expressions dark and indecipherable. Suddenly he laughed out loud, "You've got good taste in cassia wine, my dear Saint Zhou."

While Zhou Zishu tried to ignore it, he couldn't help but wiping his mouth ferociously with his sleeves, cursing, "Damn you, Wen Kexing!"

Chapter 18 - Dong Ting

Dong Ting was bustling with noise and people. In just one night, figures from all trades across jianghu were gathered here; and after having proclaimed their titles among themselves, each started pursuing their own ulterior motives.

Zhou Zishu's group, during their meal at two taverns, had already witnessed at least three fights breaking out before the day could end.

Zhou Zishu felt like this place was no better than a dog market, with people incessantly barking at each other and competing over some of the most trivial matters ever. He wondered how this "gathering of heroes" would turn out.

Deng Kuan and Gao Xiaolian took them to see Gao Chong first and foremost. There were only three factions who possessed the Realm's Command: Shaolin was highly respected in the pugilist scene, with their strength being their raw power; and Monk Gu of Mount Chang Ming was elusive but greatly admired,⁶⁴ known for his martial art skills. The most socialized out of all of them was Sir Gao, as he had a wide circle of acquaintances spreading across many big sects, and therefore was the one with the biggest influence among the three.

He was actually not at all the type of hero with a pleasant appearance and graceful manners; at first glance he looked neither handsome nor wicked, but an old, short and stout man⁶⁵ with hair gray at the temple. When he talked, there was an evident healthy spirit to him, and his laugh was especially loud and hearty.

One look at him and Zhou Zishu understood how he got his current status.

Each person had their own unique aura, and people would flock together, separating into groups based on this invisible element.

An example would be the type of people like Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu: One looked like a sickly, staggering beggar and the other a silver-tongued, male-beauty-loving troublemaker. They weren't that special at first glance, but someone with a sharp mind could easily sense the subtle distinctions to them once acquainted.

It was possible that both Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing could blend in a crowd without anyone noticing, but after all they weren't that type, so naturally there was no reason for them to do such a thing. Furthermore, blending in would only turn them into unremarkable props.

⁶⁴ The original idiom literally translates to "Divine dragon, the head of whom could be seen but never the tail".

⁶⁵ The term for "old man" used here is 老人家, which is a more polite version.

But Zhou Zishu would raise his guards every time Wen Kexing got near; and during their first meeting Wen Kexing had warned Gu Xiang against provoking the other man.

It was a kind of instinct that helped one identify their peers.

This wasn't a thing in Gao Chong's case, however.

He could be on friendly terms with anyone, and people would overlook everything from his age to his status the moment they stood before him. Whether one was young or old, from righteous sects or was simply a knight-errant, he could always evoke a sense of familiarity in them, one which made them feel like they were of the same age and had actually experienced a part of life together.

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing involuntarily stopped their nonsensical blabbering to observe this infamous Sir Gao silently; only exchanging necessary small talks at random and with politeness.

Zhou Zishu couldn't help but think, If only Tian Chuang had such a talent...

But there was only one Gao Chong in this whole world.

They arrived relatively early. A few days later, one by one came the big sects' representatives and Dong Ting Lake had very likely turned into a place for family reunion. Every day one would hear something along the line of: "Ah, You must be someone someone someone, I have heard a lot about you... Please don't flatter me, of course, the Ghost Valley has been on their evil rampage for way too long, we will not stop before they are eradicated, it is natural that I will lend my strength, so that we can finally make a move in the name of justice and righteousness..."

During the past days, Zhou Zishu had to listen to them until his ears couldn't bear it anymore. But when he was bored out of his mind, Wen Kexing was nowhere to be seen. It was a bit quiet without the other man's rowdiness.

He was strolling along the street, wearing new robes provided by the Gao family. It was obvious this was a benefit from mingling with Cao Weining's crowd, as he got to enjoy a pleasant stay at the Gao's residence with delicious food and nice clothes to replace his ragged ensemble. It actually took a while for him to get used to the new clothes. He had worn rough materials for so long that the smooth fabric felt slippery and cold to the touch, just like a layer of mucus.

He shook his head in self-mockery at his sallow, skinny hands and sallow, skinny face. This Nail-ravaged body seemed incapable of handling the clothes currently hanging on its frame, not unlike a shaky skeleton struggling to prop up the fabrics. He himself could see the wretchedness in his appearance, and a random glance at the

mirror was enough to warrant no further inspection. It was clear that even a dragon robe would not make one a Crown Prince.

Internally, he thought Wen Kexing was only mindlessly chasing after him. With the lack of those courtesans with their pretty handkerchiefs, beggars couldn't be choosers; that was obviously why the man glued himself to him to ramble his ears off.

Wasn't there a saying that "After three years in the army, even a sow will look like a goddess"? Zhou Zishu felt like Wen Kexing's situation was no different, only he was interested in boars rather than sows.

Today he visited a tavern on his own. He chose a seat by the window and asked for some side dishes and a pot of yellow wine,⁶⁶ drinking it leisurely while sunbathing.

Wen Kexing saw the other man's back the moment he walked in. It was unclear why he always got a very distinct feeling from looking at Zhou Zishu's back, to the point that he could recognize it immediately in a crowd.

His back wasn't always straightened; oftentimes it would lazily curve in a way that didn't at all affect his elegance and gave the impression of an incredibly comfortable person. Wen Kexing found out there seemed to be not a single matter that could plague his mind, and one would feel unusually peaceful and comforted the moment they landed their eyes on him.

He couldn't help but stop walking to stare blankly at Zhou Zishu's relaxed figure. An emotion surged up within him—the emotion of nothingness.

It was as if the man's attitude was presented to mock all of those out there with worries heavy on their mind but had to pretend that they were the opposite.

Zhou Xu – soul like water lenses, body like willow,⁶⁷ he thought.

The world was boundless with so many paths and sceneries to behold and experience, so how could one completely disregard all of those and keep himself in complete desolation, with no worries on his mind?

He was definitely not indifferent—he had a variety of emotions, but they came and went in a blink of an eye, seemingly never existing in the first place.

Wen Kexing inhaled deeply and cast his eyes downwards. Soon enough, back on his face was an irritatingly cheerful expression as he walked over and sat down

⁶⁶ A type of rice wine.

⁶⁷ Water lenses (or duckweed) is an aquatic plant that floats, often used in poetry and literature as a metaphor for a carefree person. Willow tree has leaves that are thin, elongated and flexible; it is often used as a metaphor for resilience and adaptability.

opposite Zhou Zishu. He took a cup without asking and snatched the wine pot from Zhou Zishu's hand, pouring one for himself and commented after a small sip: "Not too bad, this wine."

Zhou Zishu glanced at him languidly and spoke up, "Excuse me, can I have another pot? Put it on his tabs."

Wen Kexing stared back silently. Zhou Zishu gave him a soft smile, and to prove that he wasn't a stingy person, he explained, "You still owed me three silver liangs, I'm just providing a chance for you to pay me back early without additional interest. That totally works in your favor, right?"

After a long while, Wen Kexing could only let out a "... Thanks."

"You're welcome, Brother Wen." Zhou Zishu smiled back.

Wen Kexing had an unusually strong urge to tease him back, but at that moment, the tavern door behind Zhou Zishu opened and there were voices: "We will stay here for a meal for the time being. Then we can go see Brother Gao in the evening."

A somewhat familiar voice replied, "Of course, anything you say, uncle."⁶⁸

As soon as that happened, Wen Kexing got to witness a highly entertaining scene: his former creditor—who minutes ago was completely sober while being helpful with his debt—suddenly swayed side to side and fell onto the table "drunkenly" with a crashing noise. His fingers were still gripping the wine cup and his face was glued to the table; he looked as if he wanted to stand up but couldn't figure how to, all the while grumbling, "Not drunk... Can drink more..."

Wen Kexing and Gu Xiang followed Zhou Zishu and Zhang Chengling back when they were travelling together, but only Zhou Zishu noticed. Zhang Chengling at that time wasn't in a positive state of mind, therefore he didn't notice. He did meet Wen Kexing once at the shrine, but the man left no impression on him.

Zhou Zishu crashed on the table right when Zhang Chengling and Zhao Jing walked past, and they were completely clueless on their way to the upper floor.

The waiter brought them food and wine after the other two had disappeared upstairs. One glance and he asked worriedly, "Wasn't this one really sober just a moment ago, how did he get drunk that quickly..."

Zhou Zishu sat up again with no problem before he could exclaim further and took the wine pot without even looking at the food.

⁶⁸ The pronoun 伯父 is specifically used for the father's older brother (叔父 is for younger brother)

The waiter was dumbstruck as Zhou Zishu waved his arm. “Didn’t I say that I wasn’t drunk and could drink more? I’m not the type to joke about that, you know.”

The waiter was experienced enough to turned and walked away, albeit stiffly.

Wen Kexing laughed and asked with a low voice. “You scared of that kid?”

Zhou Zishu didn’t spare him a look. “Why would I be scared of him?”

“Then why did you hide?”

Zhou Zishu toyed with the peanuts and drank his wine in an unhurried manner, then answered vaguely, “Troubles. The moment he sees me he’ll go shifu this and shifu that; he’s clingy like a little girl.”

Wen Kexing’s brows were raised. “Why did you save him back then? You even sold yourself for two qians.⁶⁹”

Zhou Zishu munched on the peanuts, then spoke after a good while, “He looked pitiful.”

Wen Kexing fell silent after that. Suddenly, he took out a money pouch from his chest and counted the silvers carefully before pushing them forward. “Here are three liangs and two qians. The three liangs are for my debt, and I want to buy you with two qians. I promise I will care for you and let no one come after you.”

Zhou Zishu looked down at the gleaming silver and took a sip of wine, seemingly enjoying himself. He pushed two liangs back. “This is enough for the wine today.”

After mulling it over, he pushed the two qians back to its owner too. “I’m not selling myself to you.”

Wen Kexing had a mysterious smile on his face. “Why is that?”

“You look annoying,” Zhou Zishu answered bluntly.

Wen Kexing laughed as if it was an encouragement.

Everyone fully arrived at Dong Ting half a month later. Gao Chong requested that a large temple courtyard nearby was used as the gathering location. After another half a day, Abbot Ci Mu from Shaolin Temple came with some of his disciples to present the second Realm’s Command piece.

⁶⁹ A liang equals ten qians.

As expected, Monk Gu didn't appear in person. He ordered an around twenty-year-old, respectable-looking disciple to come in his stead to present the last Command piece.

The night the three Command pieces were reunited, the Gao's Manor was set on fire.

Chapter 19 - Night of Fire

It was impossible for Zhou Zishu to stay asleep past midnight, and while he was meditating in his room, suddenly there were piercing, terror-laden screams from outside. His brows knitted as he stood up and pushed open the window. He saw people running past with their clothes rumpled before receiving an assault of smoke and flame directly to his face.

“Fire! Fire!”

The frosty night was gradually clogged up with thick smoke; it seemed like the fire was not far from where he was staying. Zhou Zishu thought, Quite a big fire, judging from the smoke. But this is the Gao's Manor; with the amount of people currently staying here, it can't be that hard to control it. He wanted no part of this, and closed the window since he was somewhat choked up from the smoke.

An arm suddenly reached out, stopping him from closing the window. It even crudely copped a feel of the back his hand before its owner quickly jumped inside, smiling at Zhou Zishu while slipping the window shut.

Zhou Zishu judged the uninvited Wen Kexing from head to toe. He was about to say something when his nose itched, so he turned away to sneeze and firmly took two steps back, remaining a certain distance from this piece of “scented pastry” who must have strolled out of a place full of beauty products just now.

Mister “Good Person” Wen's hair was unkempt, tied up temporarily with a plain hairband. His clothes were not exactly disheveled, but the collar was wide open, a dark red mark evident on the snow white fabric. The nauseating scent of beauty products exuded from his sleeves, and on his wrist was a faint mark created from the scratching of nails... Completed with his lecherous expressions, it was as if he couldn't wait to show people what kind of activities he had been doing.

On instinct, Zhou Zishu fixed his own clothes and sat up straight, the feeling of moral superiority arising involuntarily. In that moment, compared to Wen Kexing, he felt like such a conscientious and upright gentleman.

Wen Kexing plopped himself down on Zhou Zishu's bed. The bed sheets had gone cold, which meant the owner of the room had been up for a while. He asked, “Stop trying to be dignified, tell me, are you sleepless because you feel lonesome in this deep dark night? You should've told me so that I can drag you along... Hah, Dong Ting, what a glorious place to be.”

Zhou Zishu laughed quietly and dropped his charade. He knew all too well himself that righteousness would only look proper on a righteous person, and he was the epitome of “nothing was what it seemed”.

He looked at Wen Kexing meaningfully while replying. “Your timing is impeccable, Brother Wen. The moment you left, the fire started...”

He didn't get to finish the sentence as Wen Kexing's face paled and he retorted indignantly, “Rubbish! I've been gone for hours now!”

Zhou Zishu was taken aback, at a loss as to why he would be so angry. Then he saw Wen Kexing looked him over, the anger receding to make way for his usual leering smile. “Are you changing tactics, Ah-Xu? If you remove your disguise, I can show you... how long it actually was.”

He specifically wiped his mouth after that, licking at the corner of his lips as if remembering something.

Zhou Zishu stared at him in a daze, mindlessly holding a cup to his mouth to pretend drinking, but after a good while of no liquid flowing out, he finally noticed that the cup was actually empty. Wen Kexing looked at him with interest and thought that the other man was definitely blushing under his mask, even though he couldn't see it. He got more amused the more he thought about it and ended up bursting out a giggle.

“Forgive my useless self.” Zhou Zishu gritted through his teeth.

Wen Kexing was now fully laughing out loud.

Had everyone's focus not been on the fire, this bastard would have received a beating already—who could laugh while people's houses were burning down? Zhou Zishu felt like “immoral” was a word made specifically for Wen Kexing.

Consequently, he stood up, tying his hair together and headed outside. He would rather face the fire than share a space with this person.

While the fire—whose main source was from a guest room—had been largely put out, it had shaken the entirety of the Manor. Gao Chong, pale-faced and frowning, was conversing with Deng Kuan.

Gao Xiaolian was beside them. Upon seeing him, she nodded at his direction with a sorrowful face, speaking apologetically, “My apologies, Big Brother Zhou, for your disturbed rest.”

She already left a good impression on him, so he smiled, replying gently. “Whose room was burning?”

They were interrupted by Wen Kexing now carrying an outer robe, prancing out from Zhou Zishu's room. He draped the robe over Zhou Zishu's frame, then rested his

chin on his shoulder, yawning lazily while smiling at Gao Xiaolian as a greeting with pretended drowsiness.

Gao Xiaolian's face went red immediately as she averted her gaze. Her words came out with quickness. "We heard that it was that of the Zhang young master, but there was no harm done to him. He was talking with my father and his uncle until late night, so he stayed at a side room..."

The poor girl was looking at every direction at once. She saw Wen Kexing's arms around Zhou Zishu's waist with the scratch marks on one wrist and turned impossibly redder, mumbling, "I have to join my father now, to take a look at Zhang Chengling."

Then she ran with her head lowered.

Only then did Zhou Zishu seize Wen Kexing's wrists and remove it from his body, the sound of his bones cracking perfectly matching his current fuming expression.

Wen Kexing smiled innocently, "Why the sour face, Ah-Xu? Don't you have a young disciple to care about?"

Zhou Zishu didn't let go of the other man's wrist, even holding it in front of his face for a better look. He smiled afterwards, eyes narrowing coldly at Wen Kexing. "What kind of beauty who could have left such a... pretty mark on you, Brother Wen?"

Wen Kexing's eyes brightened instantly. "Are you jealous, Ah-Xu?"

"I want to devour you."

After staring at him with eyes wide open, Wen Kexing became overjoyed and smiled. "Good, let's go back to the bedroom, I'm gonna let you devour me as you wish. Preferably more than once."

It was truly unimaginable for someone to be constantly shameless like this. With a noise of contempt, Zhou Zishu threw Wen Kexing's own wrist back at his chest. He turned to see Zhang Chengling being surrounded with lots people, his expression showing contemplation. Then he turned away with the intention of going back to his room. Zhang Chengling's room wouldn't catch fire for no reasons, and where did Wen Kexing go in the middle of the night? Why did he use him to pull a clumsy act in front of Gao Xiaolian?

At that moment, Wen Kexing's soft voice asked behind him. "Ah-Xu, in all the time I've known you, I've never seen you sleep after midnight, so are you..."

Zhou Zishu's pupils contracted. While his face didn't change, he couldn't help but stop walking.

Only to hear the other man continuing, “Are you so lonely that you can’t rest for the whole night...”

Zhou Zishu quickened his steps towards the room, as if Wen Kexing’s words were farts that he had to run away from before he choked.

Wen Kexing smiled and stopped talking. He stood there, looking at Zhang Chengling—who had become terribly thin in just a few months. The young boy seemed to have gotten a little taller, his face ashen like that of a corpse, mouth thinned, eyes black and bright, showing bits of stubbornness and restraint. His whole body was seemingly carved from fire, burning away the old crybaby and leaving a young wolf in its stead.

Only now was Wen Kexing starting to believe that this scamp was truly a child of the Zhangs. He laughed softly, speaking at Zhang Chengling’s direction without making a sound, “You better stay alert, brat.”

The next day, good old Wen found out that “Saint Zhou”—who immediately holed up in his room once Zhang Chengling came near—had vanished without a trace since the early morning, his room so tidy it gave almost no indication of someone having lived in it before.

Even Zhou Zishu himself wasn’t sure why he started following Zhang Chengling since morning. Always anticipating the worse, he found another layer of skin-like mask to put over his already carefully crafted one.

He hid in the crowd like an apparition and went past people completely unnoticed; no one paid attention to a forgettable stranger in a plain set of clothes.

Zhou Zishu remained a calculated distance away from Zhang Chengling. Everyone and their mother in this grand pugilist scene proclaimed their furious indignation, and then there was that kid who stayed silent and looked over all of them despite being the person worthy of a proclamation the most.

His eyes were wide open, his face bare and honest. Zhou Zishu was suddenly reminded of someone—the person with thick brows and big eyes under the tree whom he saw in that dark, horrible cave.

Liang Jiuxiao.

He remembered their childhood vaguely. That brat Liang Jiuxiao called him Senior Brother, constantly clinging to him and making his life as inconvenient as possible while rambling to no end. Worse, he was a fool, always slow on the uptake.

Back then Zhou Zishu was still young and impatient, so imagined his discontent and unpleasant expression when his Master threw the rascal at him.

He shouldn't get angry as a Big Senior Brother, so at times he would take some jabs at the kid. But he seemed to be completely oblivious, and wouldn't go away no matter what. Zhou Zishu ended up having to accept his situation as was.

It took Liang Jiuxiao so much more effort than the normal person for things to get through to him, and he would ask questions the moment he hit a roadblock. When his Big Senior Brother became infuriated with his inquiries, he put up with all of the harsh words and waited until Brother's anger subsided to continue asking.

Just like that Zhang brat—they were like sticking plasters, refusing to let go once applied on the skin.

But... who knew the plaster would eventually wear off one day? Who knew, that the once magnificent Lord of Si Ji Holdings, leader of Tian Chuang would one day become a ghost in the middle of the crowd, staring at a kid while agonizingly mourning the past?

Chapter 20 - Man in Red

The weather had no regards for the heroes gathered at Dong Ting, seeing how gloomy the sky was. It was as if something heavily suspended the rain in midair and it could fall down any time. The damp air was chilly and there were less and less fallen leaves.

There was a man standing in the middle of this with sadness, thinking about his hometown. Thirty years seemed like such a long dream.

Cao Chong stepped down to let Abbot Ci Mu take the reins. Zhou Zishu, while hidden in the crowd, heard the young man next to him sighed, “One day I should become someone like him.”

Xiang Yu the Overlord of Western Chu, upon seeing Emperor Shi Huang’s procession, had said, “I am fit to replace him.”⁷⁰ Liu Xiu the Emperor Guangwu during his younger years also dazedly lamented, “Palace guard leader is a worthy official title to strive for, just as Yin Lihua is a worthy maiden to wed.”⁷¹ In this vast and obscure world, who wouldn’t want to give it their all and become a legendary hero fit for the history books?

The adolescence years were always full of vitality, so it wasn’t uncommon for someone to look up at a figure, gritting his teeth and clenching his fist while exclaiming “One day, I should become someone like him.”

Someone who had the world in his power.

But what came after the glory?

Zhou Zishu’s Master passed away too soon, leaving the Si Ji Holdings in chaos with a lack of a leader. Just like that, the responsibility fell on his shoulders as he is the Big Senior Brother – but how much could a Big Senior Brother really do? He was barely over fifteen that year.

The current Emperor when he was fifteen was still biding his time however he could; Nan Ning Wang⁷² when he was fifteen was indulging in wine and pleasure and letting them cloud his senses; even the Great Shaman of South Xinjiang back when he

⁷⁰ Xiang Yu was a ruthless warlord famous for his conquests in the late Qin dynasty, and Qin Shi Huang was the most prominent Emperor of the Qin dynasty and is one of the most influential figures in Chinese history.

⁷¹ Emperor Guangwu was an emperor during the Han Dynasty, and Yin Lihua was his second empress. They knew each other when they were young and he had always been impressed with her beauty way back then.

⁷² 王 (wàng) here, while literally translates to “King”, is a title used for the current/former Emperor’s/King’s siblings.

was fifteen was a kid stranded in a foreign land as hostage, full of resentment but had no way out.

That's why Liang Jiuxiao in some ways had become his only solace as they depended on each other to live on.

But since when did the cracks in their relationship appear?

Maybe it was when Liang Jiuxiao visited the capital for the first time and saw the corrupted struggles, saw the increasingly horrible conflicts between families, saw brothers murdering each other in cold blood, saw all the crimes, framings, even deaths of loyal officials—behind all of which was the Big Senior Brother whom he always looked up to—

Gao Chong was already standing up, fiercely condemning the Ghost Valley in front of all the heroes.

Zhou Zishu's eyes were downcast, as if he was sleeping. Not a single syllable of Liang Jiuxiao's interrogating words had once left his mind all these years.

“What are you all after, really? Power? The throne? Glory and wealth?”

“Your fate will not end well if you continue down this road, please snap out of it!”

“An eye for an eye is how it is, big brother...”

An eye for an eye? Why should blood be paid back with blood while in this world there were other ways to make people suffer without dying—Zhou Zishu smiled mockingly and thought, Ah, Jiuxiao, we're both wrong after all.

At that moment, there was a grunt interrupting Gao Chong's words and Zhou Zishu's train of thought. The noise sounded like it belonged to a child, but was also strangely raspy. There was internal force underlying Gao Chong's voice, so it was evident that this person was not your run-of-the-mill type, seeing how they were able to cut him off.

They spoke louder. “Sir Gao, how can you come to the conclusion that the Ghost Valley's behind all this just with mere words? Isn't this a little far-fetched?”

Everyone's gaze was drawn to one spot, not excluding Zhou Zishu. The one who spoke up was a dwarf-like man who was only around a meter tall, currently sitting on the shoulder of another man whose build was the complete opposite. Zhou Zishu could be considered tall compared to the average man, but even he had to crane his neck to look at this giant. His hair was wild and his beard was untamed, only leaving his dark eyes visible. He carried the dwarf with care, using his huge hands to grip the smaller man's legs to prevent him from falling.

Weren't these "Earth Lord"⁷³ Feng Xiaofeng and his wishy-washy friend Gao Shannu?

Their physical attributes were too distinctive, to the point that everyone knew who they were the moment they opened their mouths. There was a glint in Zhou Zishu's eyes; in fact, he harbored no bad feelings towards this Feng Xiaofeng at all. If the rumors were correct, he was someone with a gray morality and acted on his own emotions rather than following the rules. His physique might also be the one that contributed to his stubborn and unpredictable behaviors.

Except for Gao Shannu to whom he was attached at the hip, he didn't listen to anyone else. In short, he was difficult.

Feng Xiaofeng's voice was grating to the ears. "You're being unreasonable, Sir Gao, with your talk about those "evil-doers" in the Ghost Valley. Of course the Ghosts of Qingzhu Ridge have done a lot of despicable things—they would be decent human beings otherwise. But forgive me for being rude, because with the Valley's strict rules forbidding people to leave once they enter and preventing the Ghosts from causing mayhem for years, I don't see why they have to act up right at this moment."

Gao Chong pursed his lips, his Buddha-like face no longer smiling. His eyes were unnaturally serious, carrying indescribable intimidation. He looked at Feng Xiaofeng for a good while, then asked slowly. "Is that you, Brother Feng? What is your opinion then?"

Feng Xiaofeng sneered, "Spare me all of your niceties. You think I don't know how you're calling me "Brother" on the outside but "Dwarf" on the inside? Well this dwarf has heard something through the grapevine and would like to give all you jobless heroes a warning, so that you don't go and do something embarrassing."

Zhou Zishu had heard enough to confirm the rumors about this man for himself. Feng Xiaofeng was definitely not the malicious type, he was neutral at worst; but people-pleasing seemed to be non-existent in his vocabulary. Not only was he unpleasant, others would label him a mad dog without a doubt.

There were whispers about how he cut off someone's tongue after they called him a dwarf. He would even cut the tongue of someone who address him impolitely, and when they did show him politeness he would deem it a lie—a real tough nut to crack.

Gao Chong frowned, but as a renowned hero he had to be courteous and not try to argue with a mad dog. So he asked in a civil manner, "What rumors have you heard, Sir Feng?"

⁷³ Likely refers to 土地公, a deity in Chinese myth.

Feng Xiaofeng let out a cruel laugh, sounding not unlike a mystical bird. “Why are you playing dumb, Gao Chong? I may know nothing about Mu Yunge and Yu Tianjie’s case, but do you dare say that the deaths of Zhang Yusen and the Patriarch of Tai Shan have no correlations to the Lapis Armor?”

At this, the expressions of those who were in the know changed immediately as whispers broke out. Zhou Zishu took note of Gao Chong seemingly turn to glance Abbot Ci Mu with a grave expression. In contrast, Monk Gu’s young disciple who was sitting near Gao Chong paid no attention, his posture and attitude resembling a detached immortal.

Zhang Chengling, sitting beside Zhao Jing, sneaked a look at the elder. He saw Zhao Jing’s face turned into a mix of rage, contemplation and something else rather scary after “Lapis Armor” was uttered.

The boy’s impending question was stuck in his throat.

In this relatively short amount of time, he had come to understand a lot of things. Zhang Chengling could see the contempt and pity in people’s eyes and read it in their words – that’s right, how could the famous Sir Zhang Yusen have such a coward for a son? He once heard the Zhao’s servants gossiping in secret about whether it was worth it for hundreds of people to lay down their lives just for a kid.

With him being incompetent in every aspect, how could they expect him to avenge Sir Zhang and rebuild the Zhang family?

They only saw him as a mascot to express their hatred for the Ghost Valley; then they would turn to him and said “Ah, the Zhang orphan. Don’t worry, kid, we will seek justice for your father and family.”

A helpless, pitiful mascot.

Zhang Chengling’s thought strayed to the sickly and quiet man he met in the abandoned shrine that day. Ever since that horrific night, he could never sleep without encountering nightmares, but who would care if he told them? Even uncle Zhao would tell him to straighten his spine and stop it from getting to him; that everyone would stand beside him to avenge the Zhangs. There was no one else who would embrace his shoulders and talked to him softly, that “It’s alright, sleep all you want. I’ll wake you if there’s a nightmare.”

Seeing that chaos had broken out, Feng Xiaofeng’s smirked remained as he requested that Gao Chong gave everyone an explanation about the Lapis Armor. Zhang Chengling lowered his head and was kneading his temples when there was a stealthy rush of wind flew at him, carrying a tiny ball of paper to hit his palm directly. Zhang Chengling startled, and after seeing that no one was noticing him, he bent down and picked up the paper ball.

Written on it was simply: Follow me if you want to know the truth.

When Zhang Chengling looked up, in the crowd there was a man in dark clothes who was staring at him without blinking. A cruel sneer seemed to be hung at the corner of his lips, his gaze dark and disdainful as if he was sure that the boy wouldn't follow him.

In a blink of an eye, not sure if it was out of being over-emotional or impulsive, Zhang Chengling gripped the note tightly. Taking advantage of the current commotion, he quietly left Zhao Jing's side and followed the strange man through the crowd.

No one noticed him except for Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu always had half of his attention on Zhang Chengling, and his keen eyes immediately noticed and alarming him of the man shooting the note at the boy. Seeing that Zhang Chengling discarded all notions of danger and went after the man alone, he frowned and immediately abandoned the heroes' quarrel to chase after the boy in secret.

The man seemed to be toying with him, disappearing as soon as Zhang Chengling followed him; but not long after that, there would be small rocks shooting at him from different directions, apparently mocking his extremely terrible qinggong, like a cat playing with a mouse.

Zhang Chengling gritted his teeth, unconsciously able to pursue further and further. He didn't have an aptitude for these physical activities, and after he arrived at the Zhao's Holdings, everyone was too busy about doing heroic deeds to remember to teach him more kungfu. Soon enough, his angry chase left him out of breath and dizzy. He could almost hear the sound of his pulse by the temples.

Never before had the spoiled boy been so angry with himself. He heard someone snort, "This is Zhang Yusen's brat? What a waste."

He thought, That's right, you're a waste, Zhang Chengling; why did uncle Li risk his life to save you?

Why did it have to be you?

The man then appeared in front of him, hands like claws twisting his neck. His gaze at Zhang Chengling was sinister. When the boy's body warmth slowly started to disintegrate, he realized they were standing on deserted land.

Shadows appeared seemingly from nowhere behind the man with the same fashion, circling around Zhang Chengling.

The one who led him here laughed quietly and released him. He raised his voice, “My poorly hidden friend, why must you be so worked up over a boy like this?”

A man dressed in deep red stepped forward at that. On his face was a red birthmark, making his features incredibly formidable at first glance.

Zhang Chengling’s legs started to tremble, but he tried his best to keep his chin up and feigned courage at the man in red.

The man suddenly laughed, the dry sound not unlike that from a rusty fan, causing goosebumps to erupt across the skin. In just a blink, he materialized in front of Zhang Chengling and held the boy’s neck. His fingers were cold like a corpse’s, and for a brief moment Zhang Chengling mistook him for an undead.

Then the man asked softly. “Let me ask you: That night at the Zhang’s Holdings, did you see a man with a missing finger?”

Zhang Chengling’s eyes were as wide as saucers as he tried to shake his head.

The man narrowed his eyes, softening his voice even more. “No? Think again, my good boy, did you see him? Or did you not?”

The softer his voice was, the stronger his grip became. Zhang Chengling tried to breathe and struggle out of the grip with all his might, his face reddening; but all of his retaliating punches were futile. He rasped, “Fuck you!”

The man in red seemed not to notice, a demonic smile appearing on his face. “Yes... or no?”

Zhang Chengling felt like his chest was going to burst. He knew this man wanted him to say yes, but right at this life-and-death moment, his stubbornness awoke with a vengeance as he spit on the man’s face. The grip quickly turned crueler, and Zhang Chengling had no more strength to struggle.

The man’s voice was still gentle. “I’m asking you once again: Yes, or no?”

Zhang Chengling was slipping out of consciousness. He thought, This is it...

Suddenly, the man let out a sound of pain and let go of the boy. Air rushed into his lungs and he stumbled backwards, eventually falling on the ground with a “Thud!”, coughing painfully.

The man in red took a few steps back, eyes glancing at the rock that almost broke his wrist with hostility. “Who’s there?”

Chapter 21 - Poisonous Scorpion

Out from the corner walked a gaunt man with an easily forgettable face that served no indication of his age. No one had any idea of how long he had been there, having unable to detect his presence at all.

The man in red frowned. He had no idea why, but when he looked at this plain man with nothing striking about him, there was a shuddering feeling that crawled up his spine and raised the hair at the back of his neck. He couldn't help but change his posture the closer the other man got, unblinking eyes never leaving him.

He asked again, cautiously. "Who are you?"

On instinct, Zhou Zishu was about to told him "Just a nobody" like he did to Gu Xiang; but when he looked down and saw the bruise on Zhang Chengling's neck, he thought, I've played pretend in the palace for over half of my life, why do I have to be polite to these amateurs?

The vagabond's uncouth behaviors in him had been repressed for way too long. He cast a cursory glance at the men, including the man in red – who had all become tenser – and laughed. "What makes you think I have to answer you?"

The man's eyes twitched, hands retracted under his sleeves. Apart from his birthmark whose color seemed to have become a darker shade of red, were anyone to see his hands at that moment, they would discover a layer of black smoke appearing over the skin.

The men standing beside him involuntarily spread out. After signaling each other with their eyes, they formed a circle around Zhou Zishu and Zhang Chengling.

Zhou Zishu paid no attention to them, bending down to pull at Zhang Chengling's collar and picking him up from the ground. "Stand up, kid, don't lower your head like that."

Zhang Chengling stared at him blankly, still confused since Zhou Zishu was wearing an additional layer of disguise.

The man in red was patient still. "We just want to ask the child something, my friend, don't-"

Stick your nose in other people's business was what he was about to continue with but was unable to, because Zhou Zishu had already set about with electric speed. He gripped the neck of the one who lured Zhang Chengling here in the exact same way the man in red did to the young boy.

The man spluttered, frightened; his martial art skills were not at all incompetent, but this malnourished-looking man moved in a way that was almost ghostlike, and his most vulnerable body part was at the man's mercy before he even had a chance to evade.

Even a new martial art practitioner would know that the neck and chest were the most vulnerable parts on the body and had to be looked out for with utmost vigilance; those are the places that one would protect unconsciously. A person who dared aim for another's neck was either very unseasoned or very confident in their ability.

Zhou Zishu's lips curled without a single hint of real mirth. "Am I your grandpa?"

The man in his grip was initially startled, then enraged; he started to yell without taking his current situation into account. "You..."

But that was all he could utter as Zhou Zishu strengthened his hold and turned his vulgar words into hoarse cries. During the panic, he lifted his arm to hit Zhou Zishu's chest, but it was dislocated before he could see the man made a move. There was only a wretched distorting scream heard between them.

Zhou Zishu drawled. "Answer me. Am. I. Your. Grandpa?"

The man in red asked angrily. "What do you want?"

Zhou Zishu turned his attention to him and smiled cruelly. "Just some trivial matters that need this bastard's cooperation. Don't poke your nose in other people's business."

Veins throbbed on the back of his palm, and the man convulsed a little before turning still with his eyes rolled back, not even a scream being let out. It was unclear whether he was dead or not.

Zhou Zishu loosened his grip, and the man slid to the ground almost boneless.

At the same time, two more charged towards them – one targeting the barely-managing-to-stand-firmly Zhang Chengling, one targeting Zhou Zishu with a hook in his hand that smelled of rotten meat. He didn't bother to dodge and instead kicked at the attacker square in the chest at a mind-boggling angle. The strength from that kick made the man spat out blood while he flew backwards to conveniently hit Zhang Chengling's sneak attacker, causing both of them to fall like bottle gourds.

Zhou Zishu frowned, picking Zhang Chengling up by the neck with distaste. He threw the boy aside like a small kitten and said impatiently, "Wait here, little nuisance, and don't move."

Zhang Chengling felt like his body was as light as a feather when he was picked up and thrown. His eyes widened for a brief second as he mouthed silently, “Shifu...”

Other men continued attacking Zhou Zishu while the man in red remained still.

Zhang Chengling didn’t even dare to blink at the sight in front of him. He remembered his father’s words back when he was little, that martial arts had many different paths and styles to pursue – some steady and unflinching, some incredibly sharp and impenetrable, some fast and rushed like a storm. But all of those above involved visible techniques, and the most magnificent one would have to be when one couldn’t see, sense or hear it, completely indescribable and featureless like the rain in spring at first glance – he summed it up as “quick like startled birds, making light work of the most burdensome.”

At that moment, he finally understood what it was like to be “making light work of the most burdensome.”

Each of those men carried an identical hook that looked like a scorpion’s tail when one examined closely. The hooks were glowing faint blue and carried a demonic aura. Zhang Chengling had yet to know that these people were the infamous “Poisonous Scorpion”, a band specializing in murder and thievery. They would do any disgusting and despicable things imaginable for money.

However, right now they were a complete mess. Zhou Zishu seemed to be barely moving around, his gait almost too lazy. He was empty-handed and his body moved in such a flexible way that made him look completely devoid of bones, but none of the attackers could land a finger on his clothes. Only when one touched him did they realize how truly dangerous he was.

After a while, Zhang Chengling’s head spun with dizziness.

Just under an hour, thirteen Scorpions were knocked out.

Zhang Chengling was incredibly invigorated at this sight, his fist clenched tightly. Zhou Zishu gently dusted off his robes, standing opposite the man in red and examining him for a good while. He tilted his head, his eyes narrowed. “With that birthmark on your face and that famous “demon hand”, surely you must be the messenger of bad luck, Sun Ding the Delighted Mourning Ghost?”

The man’s expression shifted.

Zhou Zishu smiled coldly. “The Ghost Valley had its rules and regulations, once you’ve become a Ghost you cannot leave except for certain times. What nerves you have to come to Dong Ting to attack someone in plain sight.”

The man in red spoke through clenched teeth. “You talk too much.” He became a flurry of red that exuded a smell that was a combination of the smell of fish and rotten corpses, his charge attack barely visible to the eye.

Zhou Zishu immediately flew back a few feet.

The man didn’t land a hit, but Zhang Chengling could see very clearly – on the ground where Zhou Zishu was standing moments ago was a deep mark in the shape of a hand, and the fluttering blades of grass around it all withered at an incredible speed. The boy looked up in astonishment; so this man really was Sun Ding the delighted Mourning Ghost!

Mu Yunge and Fang Buzhi’s murderer!

Zhou Zishu broke a branch in passing, and with a shout, he pierced it into the space between the Ghost’s hands. The branch quickly shriveled up; but Zhou Zishu, still expressionless, pressed further. There seemed to be an influx of vitality poured into the branch, making it more flexible. The Delighted Mourning Ghost felt like it was almost a living being and carried an adherent force.

Alarmed, he took a few steps backwards but Zhou Zishu’s pressure had almost reached his abdomen. He struggled to tumble away and regain his footing, face ghastly pale. Zhou Zishu threw the tree branch aside when the deadly energy was about to spread to his hand. He fixed his sleeves and stood there grimly.

The Ghost, in a show of exceptional pragmatism, immediately disappeared without hesitation once he touched the ground.

Zhang Chengling shouted, “He’s trying to run!”

Zhou Zishu looked at him, then turned and walked away uncaringly. Zhang Chengling rushed to him and cried, “Shifu!”

Zhou Zishu halted, brows knitted, “Who’s your shifu?”

Zhang Chengling followed him regardless, tugging at his arms and looking up at him. “I just know that it’s you, my Uncle Zhou who saved me, my shifu.”

Who else would speak with this mildly irritated voice while talking to him? Who else would have these bony but warm hands? Who else would have this strange, ghostlike style of fighting? Who else in that crowd would follow him here and rescue him?

Zhang Chengling was unflinching in his judgement. Zhou Zishu wasn’t expecting to trick people for long anyway, but he was still disappointed that the brat saw through him. “You...” He tried to get rid of this tail in the most tactful way possible.

His eyes suddenly turned cold before he could finish the sentence, one hand tugging Zhang Chengling closer to his chest and body quickly moving aside. Zhang Chengling had no time to react, he could only feel a rush of wind brushing them and the arms holding him stiffening. Zhou Zishu's voice was icy. "Death-seeking bastard!"

The attacker's neck was broken in one movement before he had the chance to jump at them.

When Zhang Chengling took a closer look, he saw that this man was the first one Zhou Zishu knocked out; who could have imagined that he was only faking his death earlier.

The boy was thrown aside once more. Zhou Zishu walked away without a word, but there was no way Zhang Chengling was going to let him leave again, so he followed the man unabashedly.

However, he quickly grew dizzy as the man was nowhere to be seen. Zhang Chengling knew that it would take decades for him to catch up with the elder's qinggong skills; he was on the verge of tearing up, miserably calling after him, "Shifu..."

At that moment, he heard a faint laugh, and a man dressed in gray appeared from thin air, stopping Zhou Zishu in his track and wrapping his arms around Zhou Zishu's waist in a clearly calculated fashion.

Zhou Zishu had no idea why his body was stopped in midair and before he could realize, he was already in the other man's embrace.

Then he heard the familiar, most annoying voice on Earth, "Why the rush, my Saint Master Zhou?"

When they touched the ground, Zhou Zishu cried out and clutched at his right arm. Wen Kexing removed his sleeve without a second thought, intentionally tearing it at a certain angle.⁷⁴ Then he immediately frowned – there were two tiny wounds on Zhou Zishu's arm, like he was bitten by insects.

"No wonder why you ran so quickly, turns out the Scorpion did bite you."

Zhang Chengling had a sudden revelation. He looked back at their now dead attacker, face turning white.

⁷⁴ Cut-sleeve is a historical slang for gay men, and Wen Kexing was trying to insinuate that he's sure Zhou Zishu was also one.

Wen Kexing stopped Zhou Zishu from talking and made quick work blocking the flow between his meridians. “Shut up.”

He took out a magnet and carefully removed the two hair-thin needles buried in the other’s skin. Then he bent down, putting his mouth to the wound to extract the poison from Zhou Zishu’s blood without a care.

As soon as that happened, Zhou Zishu became stiff as a board.

Chapter 22 - The Divine

Wen Kexing methodically sucked out all the poisoned blood in Zhou Zishu's arm and treated his wounds skillfully. He removed the other man's meridian blocking and took out a small medicine bottle. He swallowed one pill and put one more in his palm, holding it near Zhou Zishu's mouth while snickering, voice drawn out obscenely. "Come one, Ah-Xu, open your mouth."

Zhou Zishu stared back with a sullen face. Wen Kexing, wholly energized as he was, kept on his blinding smile; other man's stare could be a drill and it would not be enough to pierce through his thick face. He took a meaningful look at Zhang Chengling and deliberately lowered his voice. "We've already kissed and seen everything there is of each other, why are you still so shy?"

Zhou Zishu took the pill and left without looking back.

Wen Kexing then signaled Zhang Chengling, who was still standing there dumbly. He said, evidently in good spirits, "Seeing that your shifu isn't running, this sure is a once-in-a-life-time chance for you to follow him. What are you waiting for?"

The sky had turned dark. The Scorpions had lured Zhang Chengling from Dong Ting's gathering to way over here, and now he had no idea how far away he was, causing him to become extremely disoriented.

After a while, Zhou Zishu returned carrying a few big hares, and he went on to make food for the other two quietly. Wen Kexing said to Zhang Chengling smilingly, "Do you know what the second most adorable type of people is?"

Zhang Chengling stared up at him. It made sense since shifu was injured; but still, this man could easily rein him in without breaking a sweat, that really said enough about his ability. Furthermore, he didn't seem to be right in the head, so the boy was even more intimidated. He shook his head.

Wen Kexing continued. "It's the type who's hard on the outside but soft on the inside—then, do you know what the most adorable type is?"

Zhou Zishu—currently disemboweling the hares with great skill—glanced at Wen Kexing coldly. "Stop spouting nonsense and go find some wood."

Wen Kexing happily complied, but when he turned away, he still saw Zhang Chengling staring perplexedly out of the corner of his eyes. Thinking the boy was being curious, he explained in a haughty fashion, "That type would be those who in addition have an incredible body⁷⁵ to match."

Zhou Zishu spoke up casually. "Don't listen to him boasting rubbish, kid."

⁷⁵ Wen Kexing's literal words were "long-legged and slender-waisted."

Zhang Chengling's uncertain gaze turned to Zhou Zishu. Did he understand this wrong? But clearly this man said...

Zhou Zishu continued, "Distance yourself from him, lest he take an interest in you."

Wen Kexing tripped on withered leaves and turned his head around, speaking as if he was hurt. "You've wronged me, Ah-Xu."

Zhou Zishu pointed at the dead hares. "If you don't go get some wood right now, I'm gonna open you up like I did with these little friends."

Wen Kexing startled, running away while protecting his stomach like a skittish rabbit.

Zhou Zishu found a creek to wash his hands, awkwardly wrapping the torn part of his sleeves back around his arm. The sensation of Wen Kexing's lips still lingered; and he was acutely aware that the man went as far as slightly licking the wound after he was done, causing his temple to throb – that move was clearly intentional.

Zhou Zishu tore away the mask on his face spitefully and threw it into the water. This was the first time in his entire life did he come to know of such a bizarre man, who was so ravenous for another man's touch that he would gladly accept anyone within the vicinity, who let no chance of publicly flaunting his sexual appetite slide.

When he turned his face sideways, Zhang Chengling recognized the familiar visage and happily shouted, "Shifu!", as if he had only just now known that it was him. He fussed around the elder like a puppy, but still kept a certain distance out of caution.

Zhou Zishu saw it out of the corner of his eyes and caved in, flicking his hand. "Come here."

Zhang Chengling went to him animatedly and spoke in a sweet voice, "Shifu."

After contemplation, Zhou Zishu said, "At your speed we won't be able to make it back tonight, so let's sleep out here and I'll return you to Sir Zhao in the early morning."

Zhang Chengling's eyes instantly dimmed. He said nothing, only staring at his shoes instead in dejected silence. Zhou Zishu's easily-persuaded soul couldn't stand this look from the boy, so he coughed and frowned. "What are you doing?"

Zhang Chengling, head still down, answered quietly. "Okay."

The boy went silent once more, sneaking glances at Zhou Zishu. He turned away once caught, mouth quivering, eyes blinking with a single tear clinging on to his eyelashes.

Zhou Zishu leaned onto a tree and sat down. He had no idea how to treat this kid right; did he end up like this because Zhang Yusen raised him like how he would a daughter, since maybe he was fated to be unable to have one? As a result, he grimaced and faked irritation. “Stand up straight and raise your head!”

Zhang Chengling started, his back straightened immediately. The moment he raised his head, tears rolled down his face like a dam had burst open. Zhou Zishu got even more worried, his voice unknowingly softened. “Wipe your face and man up, why does this make you cry anyway?”

Zhang Chengling wiped his face with much effort and got even more sullen because he couldn’t get his face entirely cleaned. That seemed to be the last straw and he spoke between broken sobs, “Shifu... shi... I don’t, don’t cry all the time, I, I... It’s just that I saw you, I saw you and felt really sad... I, I... I...”

Zhou Zishu felt a terrible headache coming up, so he averted his gaze with an indifferent expression, no longer keen on facing the kid.

Wen Kexing returned with wood to this exact moment and was slightly stunned.

The sky had turned completely dark. The sunlight was gradually disappearing from the horizon, leaving the western sky a gloomy ash-gray shade. The evening star was hung up on a tree branch and the wind began to pick up, spreading the feeling of coolness.

Wen Kexing silently sharpened the wood and made a fire, putting up the hares that were carefully prepared by Zhou Zishu and roasting it patiently. Then he started to hum an unfamiliar tune that somewhat resembled “The Eighteen Touches”⁷⁶ and completely suited his manners. Zhou Zishu sat beside him wordlessly, one leg bent and hands on his knees. Zhang Chengling sat next to them, trying his best to stop his sobbings.

After a good while, the smell of meat started floating in the air, and Zhang Chengling’s stomach rumbled loudly, causing him to blush. Wen Kexing looked at him and smiled, “Gotta wait a bit more, it’s not fully cooked yet.”

Zhang Chengling nodded endearingly. Wen Kexing felt like he was even more well-behaved than a little rabbit, so he turned to Zhou Zishu, “Oh dear, hear me out. If he wants to accompany you so bad, why don’t you let him? Why repeatedly come to his rescue if you want him out of your sight?”

⁷⁶ A Chinese folk song.

Zhou Zishu slowly stood up and put his hands near the fire as the acupuncture points on his chest were starting to hurt, making him dread the chilliness.

Wen Kexing kicked him with the tip of his shoes. “I’m asking you here.”

“I rescue him because I like to.” Zhou Zishu answered, still sluggish.

Zhang Chengling suddenly spoke up, his voice hoarse and trembling a little. “Actually, you don’t have to, shifu, I only bring troubles. There are so many people who want to kill me, I... I’m not skillful at anything, and even led them to hurt you...”

Wen Kexing comforted him. “Don’t worry, his skin is the thickest out there—don’t you look at me like that. Normal people only have a single layer of skin, unlike you who’s like a whole rice cake,⁷⁷ as if one isn’t enough.”

At Zhang Chengling’s astonished face, Wen Kexing continued his explanation patiently. “Look at his arms, do you see how the color of the skin from his wrist down is completely different from his wrist up? You shifu can’t lie to save his life, but he’s still not willing to reveal himself to me even now.”

Zhou Zishu ignored him and tore a part of the hare’s legs to savor leisurely.

When he was about to tear another, Wen Kexing flinched with distaste. “It’s not done roasting yet, are you a hungry ghost?”

Only when Zhou Zishu had swallowed the meat did he turn to Wen Kexing. “Were you a woman in your past life, why do you smell of beauty products all the time? And regardless of all those handkerchiefs you have, stop with that motor mouth that’s full of gibberish.”

Wen Kexing shut up instantly.

A few minutes later, the hares were roasted beautifully with glistening golden skin, crispy outside and tender inside. Zhou Zishu called Zhang Chengling to join them; and two men plus one kid dove in completely unceremoniously since they were all ravenous after a whole day. Soon enough, there were only clean bones left.

Now full, the three sat around the fire for warmth. Zhou Zishu leaned back and closed his eyes to rest, while Wen Kexing said to Zhang Chengling, “Why is your kungfu so bad? Didn’t your father teach you anything?”

⁷⁷ 粽子(zòngzi) is a dish made of rice, stuffed with different fillings and has layers of bamboo leaves as wrappings.

Zhang Chengling mumbled. “He did. I’m just too stupid and lazy, so I already forgot most of them.”

Wen Kexing replied after some thoughts, head shaking. “When I was little and my father taught me things, I was lazy too, but I’m not really stupid...”

Zhou Zishu couldn’t help but scoff, eyes still closed.

Wen Kexing ignored him, judging Zhang Chengling head to toe then said casually. “Do you want to learn something?”

Zhang Chengling’s head snapped up, looking at the man with shining eyes.

The passion in his gaze turned Wen Kexing daze with surprise; it had been a while since he saw that much honesty, perseverance and reckless desire in someone. “You... kid, why did you suddenly turn into a wolf now?”

Zhang Chengling abruptly knelt. “Sir! Please teach me, I will do anything for you!”

Wen Kexing rubbed his nose and cleared his throat. “Look at you, I’m not interested in the younglings-” A cough.

The fire cast shades of red on the young boy’s face, coating his still slightly childish features with determination, then vulnerability and imploration.

Being stared at intensely like that, Wen Kexing reacted the same way as Zhou Zishu which was turning his gaze away uneasily. After some hesitation, he sighed and stood up, dusting himself off and picking up a moderate wooden stick. “Alright, I’m gonna teach you some moves. Watch carefully, I won’t do them twice.”

To his promise, he demonstrated very thoroughly. Zhang Chengling didn’t miss one thing, and started practicing on his own afterwards. He really wasn’t a bright kid; and while Wen Kexing said he wouldn’t repeat, he found himself correcting the boy and explaining to him in details. Zhang Chengling looked at him with his eyes bright, the excitement making his voice tremble. “Thank you sir, thank you sir!” He repeated.

Wen Kexing, evidently having never received that much gratitude, started revealing a rare cautious side of himself.

They continued past midnight but Zhang Chengling seemed to show no sign of fatigue, still practicing vigorously. Wen Kexing sat to one side in silence, his smiling expression vanished. He appeared to be deep in thoughts.

Suddenly, he heard the gentle voice of the seemingly-asleep Zhou Zishu. “Your last name is Wen... Who was “The Divine” Wen Ruyun to you?”

Wen Kexing's whole body seemed to jolt. After a while, he lowered his head. "He was my father."

Zhou Zishu, eyes now wide open, stared at his side profile. He spoke again with a much more serious tone. "I have always heard of and respected The Divine Senior Wen Ruyu with his sword "Dazzling Fall", who travelled with his wife and genius physician Gu⁷⁸ Miaomiao to help those in need and later retired to a reclusive life. My apologies for having never realized that you're his progeny."

⁷⁸ 谷 (gǔ), not to be confused with 顾 (gù) in Gu Xiang.

Chapter 23 - Old Tales

Wen Kexing's smile seemed to be hiding unspeakable sadness. "I'm surprised there's still someone who can recognize his swordsmanship."

Zhou Zishu fell silent. Not even Tian Chuang was entirely infallible; had it been the case then he wouldn't be able to escape in the first place. Though, it was twenty years ago when the Swordsman of the Dazzling Fall secluded himself from the world, so no one really knew what happened with him and his wife since then.

He quietly studied Wen Kexing – the other man was sitting by the fire, back curved. He was supervising Zhang Chengling's clumsy execution of what he was taught by his father long ago with a still, distant gaze. His aura exuded indifference and detachment, somewhat similar to how Wen Ruyu's manners would be in Zhou Zishu's imagination.

Then Wen Kexing began to sing. "There was the millet with drooping heads; then there was the new sacrificial millet sprouting. I moved about idly, heart in turmoil. Those who knew me spoke of my sorrows, and those who did not said I was seeking something. O distant and azure Heaven! By whom was this caused? There was the millet with drooping heads; then there was the new sacrificial millet sprouting..."⁷⁹

His voice was pitched incredibly low and was a little hoarse, a little morose. It carried a sense of disarray with the mixed-up words, each phrase and sentence sounding like it was rumbling deep in his chest and stuck in his throat, refusing to come out.

The fire crackled. Zhang Chengling turned to them to ask for instructions as he was confused about this one move, but his steps halted at the nearby singing.

Back when King Ping of Zhou ruled over the country and having to move residence, legends had it that when the physician Chu passed by Zongzhou,⁸⁰ the crumbling shrines and palace brought sadness to his face. Seeing the ground overran with weeds and millet, he thought up this sad melody.

He mourned the buried halcyon days, for the past that was no longer reachable.

Zhang Chengling, moved by the song, had numerous thoughts blooming inside of him. As young as he was, he didn't think he had the courage to return to the Zhang

⁷⁹ From the poem 黍離/Drooping Millet, from the Book of Odes collection compiled by Confucius.

⁸⁰ Also called Haojing (the original text calls it both Zongzhou Haojing), it's one of the two settlements that comprise the capital of the Western Zhou dynasty. King Ping moved the capital from Zongzhou to Luoyang, beginning the Eastern Zhou dynasty.

residence in Jiangnan, the place that held his precious childhood memories. It must have been in a great state of ruin by now, a burden that he had to carry to the end of his life.

Zhou Zishu's eyes narrowed as he fumbled for the wine pot tied around his hip. He took a big gulp with his head tilted backwards, the spiciness rushing straight up to his head and gagging him, making him shed a few tears.

Those who knew me spoke of my sorrows, and those who did not said I was seeking something...

This line was sung by Wen Kexing over and over with a hint of self-deprecation. His eyes curved, as if he found it entertaining.

What was he seeking, really?

After a good while, no one spoke. Wen Kexing's humming died down; Zhang Chengling was already asleep, body tilted to one side, the tree branch he took passing now enveloped in his arms like a treasured sword. Something in his dream made his lips curve up and his brows furrow profoundly.

Zhou Zishu stood up, shedding his outer robes and using it to gently cover the child. His head hung low as he sighed, "Your father's Dazzling Fall's Eighteen Patterns was said to have taken jianghu by storm. Out of the three moves you have taught the boy, none of them seemed to belong to the Patterns; but when I thought about it, the Eighteen patterns and its ever-changing nature all originated from those three moves. What excellent... successor you are, Brother Wen, to have surpassed your father."

Wen Kexing's voice also lowered when he replied calmly. "His swordsmanship is definitely not as good as mine, but he was good at medicine while I completely suck at it. The most I can do is bandaging wounds or battling a cold."

Then he turned to face Zhou Zishu. "Since you possess such keen apprehension of the old man's sword skills, what else do you know?"

Zhou Zishu joined him by the fire. He pulled up his collar and hid half of his hands under the sleeves while warming himself up. He spoke slowly. "In jianghu there is the elusive Shaman Medicine Valley whose medication is almost indistinguishable from poison and vice versa; and there is also the Divine Medicine Valley whose practice is solely to help people. It's said that though the latter is not well-versed in martial arts, no one dare cross them. Your mother Madame Gu was the closed-door disciple of the Valley Master and rumored to be the most beautiful woman when she was a maiden. Some times after there was news about her marriage, causing many hearts to break."

Wen Kexing laughed softly at that, teasing, "How does a grown man like you know so much gossip? Do you have nothing better to do with your life?"

Zhou Zishu smiled back, "Not really, that's why you're hearing all this."

The two went quiet for a brief moment. Wen Kexing then muttered, "Those are all stories from so long ago..."

Perhaps they did share similarities, as when Zhou Zishu heard the other's singing and sighing, he seemed to have understood something. He couldn't help but give a gentle reply, trying to be a little comforting, "Your parents were some of the rare good people in this world. They were a true match made in heaven, traveling across jianghu together then retreating to seclusion together. Were I to have such a life, I wouldn't have any regrets even if I have to die tomorrow."

Wen Kexing's smile was terribly faint. "Good people?"

He looked almost dazed in the dead silence of the night. "Can't believe after that many years there's still someone who remembers them and calls them good. Say, what makes a good person? Why do humans have to be good?"

Zhou Zishu was about to answer when he detected signs of movement from Zhang Chengling. The boy seemed to be having trouble breathing before the pattern changed. Zhou Zishu didn't have to look at him to know that he was startled awake by yet another nightmare.

Zhang Chengling said nothing and merely curled in place, clutching at Zhou Zishu's robes and the tree branch while listening to them.

At that, Zhou Zishu swallowed the words he was about to say. He thought over it carefully for a while, then replied in a neutral tone. "Not everyone in the world is a good person, but a majority of them tries to be so, to the point that they're willing to fake it."

He paused for a bit before continuing. "As for why they do... I think it's because only when you are good to others will they treat you well in return. When you're good you will have friends, acquaintances, family, people who want to be near you, to be nice to you. Think about it, isn't it too miserable of a life if all you have is yourself and you treat everyone else with wariness? It's too painful, being a bad person."

Wen Kexing was stunned listening to that. After a good while, he smiled and shook his head.

Zhou Zishu said no more about it and added more wood to the fire. Wen Kexing's head lowered, eyes gazing at the sparkling flame. He shook his head again but more slowly.

Finally, his arms crossed behind his head as he lay down facing the bright starry night. A long sigh was followed by words that were almost impossible to hear. “Fair enough... Ah-Xu, you’re quite a reasonable man.”

Zhou Zishu only smiled at that.

Wen Kexing’s next question sounded like he was talking to himself. “Can a despicable man... also be piteous?”

“Of course.” Zhou Zishu answered.

Wen Kexing nodded to himself, uncaring about Zhou Zishu’s possible scrutiny. He then gave a solemn comment. “Ah-Xu, I just realize even though you may not be beautiful, you still suit my taste just fine.”

Zhou Zishu’s mouth twitched; he knew that this man could never stay serious for long before reverting back to his lecherous ways. He chose to ignore him.

Wen Kexing propped himself up on one elbow, looking up to Zhou Zishu all smiling, “Seeing that you adore my late parents that much, you should just follow me from now on. We can travel across jianghu together and then retreat to somewhere just like them, no need to be thinking about dying tomorrow. I don’t mind being with you at all, so what do you say?”

Zhou Zishu’s expression remained unchanged. “Apologies, but I don’t really deserve such appreciation from Brother Wen.”

Wen Kexing cackled, and in a degenerate fashion enjoyed very much that Zhou Zishu seemed terribly annoyed with him – to the point of breaking the wooden fire stick in his hand – but had to resort to the silent treatment as there was no outlet to vent the frustration. He felt incredibly good about himself, having shamelessly delighted in other people’s misery.

The next morning, Zhang Chengling returned the robe to Zhou Zishu with a tiny voice. “Thank you, shifu.”

Zhou Zishu took it and spared him a look. “Come on, we’re going back to the Gao’s.”

Zhang Chengling stopped walking, then continued to follow him like a scorned young bride.

Wen Kexing ignored that and consoled him. “Your shifu seems pretty determined to mingle with those heroes and be in cahoots with them. He’s still staying with the

Gaos at the moment, so for now you should just follow Sir Zhao, you can still look for him whenever you want.”

He quickly added, “Of course, you can always seek me out too.”

Zhou Zishu spoke up while staying ahead of them. “When did I ever say that I want to mingle with those people?”

Wen Kexing rubbed his chin, simpering. “So you’re not staying?”

Zhou Zishu frowned. “Not staying.”

Wen Kexing threw Zhang Chengling a glance. “For real?”

“For real...”

Unprompted, Zhou Zishu looked at Zhang Chengling. The boy was staring at him unblinkingly, his eyes similar to that of a skittish rabbit, face showing restrained hope. The moment their eyes met, his lips thinned as he feigned seriousness. At a loss for words, Zhou Zishu merely grunted and kept walking.

Wen Kexing, eager to add fuel to the fire, patted the boy’s head and exclaimed, “Hey Ah-Xu, do you think we look like a family of three?”

Zhou Zishu’s steps quickened.

With a serious father-like charade, Wen Kexing’s said to Zhang Chengling gently, “Since journey is long and there’s nothing to do anyway, how about I tell you a story?”

Zhang Chengling nodded like the well-behaved child he was. Wen Kexing began smugly, “Once upon a time, there was a demon child living at the foot of Mount Wu Xing with other demons and ghosts. Of course, the child despised his kind, since all they did was causing troubles...”

He seemed to have a talent with storytelling. Ahead of them, Zhou Zishu heard Wen Kexing’s melodic voice rendering the foolish young boy absolutely awed. He became conscious of the fact that Despicable Wen could very well be a travelling tale teller.

“...the Red Child knew that he was an individual with exceptional heritage: His mother was a white snake spirit who was called the White Maiden. She had a love

affair with a human, and when a monk named Fahai found out, he sealed her under Mount Hua...”⁸¹

Zhou Zishu suddenly tripped over a stone and almost fell head first to the ground.

“...the Red Child wanted to break the mountain apart to save his mother, but the monk asked for the immortals’ help to stop him. The child had the upper hand, but what he didn’t anticipate was that the ghosts he lived with also betrayed him and wanted him dead.”

Zhou Zishu had nothing to comment at this point. Zhang Chengling was still rapt with attention. “Why is that?”

Wen Kexing answered. “Because there was a big big secret: The snake spirit was actually not a spirit at all; she was a mere mortal with some cultivation in her. But somehow rumors got out, and she was treated like a demon and was sealed under the mountain. Say, if she was ever released, then wouldn’t their family be all normal people? Wouldn’t the child be just an ordinary mortal then?”

Zhang Chengling listened to him dumbly. “Ah, mortal... I still don’t understand...”

Wen Kexing laughed, “Silly child. If you’re of a different race, your heart will be different from us.”

Zhou Zishu startled, an idea vaguely forming in his head and went away before he had the chance to delve further into it. He heard Zhang Chengling ask, “Then did the Red Child die? Was the mountain destroyed?”

After thinking it over, Wen Kexing asked him back, “I haven’t thought that part up yet, what’s your idea?”

Zhang Chengling’s answer was absolute. “Of course he defeated the demons, saved his mother and became an invincible hero!”

“Hm...” Wen Kexing added, “Maybe. But that’s boring, most versions ended that way... What if the Red Child became an ordinary man from then on, no longer possessing his magical powers?”

Zhang Chengling “Ah”-ed, feeling like this ending was somewhat pitiful but couldn’t explain why. He glanced at Wen Kexing, deciding that this senior was not

⁸¹ Wen Kexing was purposefully mixing up the legends to mess with Zhang Chengling; the tale of the Red Boy is separate from the tale of the white snake. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Boy &
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legend_of_the_White_Snake

that bad and having the urge to befriend him. He probed, “Will you... tell me another story, then?”

Wen Kexing, finally found a loyal listener, appreciated the boy’s admiration. Consequentially, he continued to ramble on, from the tales of the owl with the red water bowl, to Jiang Ziya fighting the White Bone Spirit, to Cui Yingying throwing her beauty trunk into the water out of rage, and so on. His strange and interesting tales lasted all the way to Dong Ting.

Once the three have arrived at the Gao’s Manor, they ran into Cao Weining. Zhang Chengling’s appearance surprised him, and he called out, “Oh dear, young master, to where did you follow these two? Sir Zhao was driven half mad trying to find you!”

Zhou Zishu said, “We coincidentally found him running outside on his own so we chased after him. We didn’t have time to warn anyone beforehand, and...”

Cao Weining tugged him inside before he could finish, “You missed the big news, quick, come inside! Everyone is a mess fighting each other right now!”

Chapter 24 - Ghost Face

Zhou Zishu had absolutely no interest in all of this; it wouldn't bother him in the slightest even if they beat each other to death. The only thing he wanted to do at the moment was to find a tavern to resupply his empty wine pot, then look for a place to sleep away the "Red Boy broke the mountain to save White Snake" tale he just heard.

He gracefully slipped out of Cao Weining's hold and explained. "How about we bring the kid back to Sir Zhao first."

Cao Weining smacked his head. "Right, I almost forgot."

The young man turned to Zhang Chengling, his perpetually transparent expression showing a strange sort of pity. He sighed and patted Zhang Chengling's shoulder, "You have suffered too much for someone so young. Be careful next time, alright?"

Since he and the boy were not that acquainted, the younger just stood there ignorantly. Wen Kexing were quick to react as he cut in, "What is it, are these people still quarrelling over the Lapis Armor? Are they being suspicious of the Zhang family..."

He glanced at Zhang Chengling and stopped there.

Cao Weining explained everything, since the trio wasn't considered outsiders in his eyes. "This is the worst time for you all to be messing around out there; there was a big commotion yesterday. Everything exploded the moment Feng Xiaofeng mentioned the Armor, so much that Sir Gao and Abbot Ci Mu could barely contain the uproar. There were many who started to harbor other intentions towards it; like Yu Jiufeng the Patriarch of Hua Shan Sect, who was the first to question Sir Zhao Jing about whether the latter had taken the Zhang's piece of lapis for himself and caused his son's death."

After some thoughts, Cao Weining continued in a dull tone, like he was repeating the words from someone else. "Yu Jiufeng was crying and sniveling as if this was a funeral or something. E Mei, Kong Tong and Cang Shan Sects were all on good terms with Hua Shan, so they sided with Yu Jiufeng. Not only did they question about the murders that happened outside the Zhao's Holdings, the lot of Feng Xiaofeng also further fueled the fire; so a brawl started as a result. Some wanted Sir Gao to give an explanation for the Ghosts' sudden appearance in jianghu, as well as what the Lapis Armor actually was."

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu looked at Cao Weining with amusement. How did this slow-witted kid suddenly get so eloquent after just a day?

Cao Weining coughed. "Those were the words of my Uncle Master. As for the details of the quarrels, I don't really understand either."

No wonder he said it that way...

Zhou Zishu suddenly said to Zhang Chengling, "Do you happen to know anything, kid? Otherwise your room wouldn't have been set aflame and the Scorpions wouldn't be out for your life."

Zhang Chengling stared at him dumbly and shook his head.

Zhou Zishu looked disdainful, having enough of this foolishness. He ignored the boy and turned to Cao Weining. "It would do us a great service if Brother Cao brings him back to Sir Zhao."

Then he immediately turned and walked away, showing no interest in the current chaos.

Zhang Chengling's eyes followed his figure, mouth pursed.

All of a sudden he felt a hand rubbing his hair. He looked up, and once he saw Wen Kexing smiling, he said awkwardly, "Sir."

Wen Kexing said, "Do you know why he fakes all of his composure and elegance with other people and only shows his impatient side to you?"

Zhang Chengling's head lowered as he mumbled, "Because I'm too dumb..."

Wen Kexing laughed. "Nah, you're only moderately stupid, not that stupid. He doesn't wear a façade around you because he wants to befriend you; he just won't say it out loud because he's shy."

Zhang Chengling was taken aback. "Really?"

With his eyes narrowed in mirth, Wen Kexing stared at Zhou Zishu's back. He said unconcernedly, "His parents might be the ones who gave birth to him, but the one who knows him best is himself. Other than that, his only soulmate is me, so of course I'm not lying."

—the man's severe internal injuries, his disguise, his habit of disappearing out of the blue, his kungfu, his vast knowledge of jianghu's matters inside out; except for Tian Chuang, he had no other explanations.

But if he really was from Tian Chuang, how did he escape the punishment of those monstrous Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns?

After a few days stuck with this puzzling question, Wen Kexing came to a revelation. The important thing here was not how he escaped them, but that he knew how to escape—

Oh dear, I'm afraid I'm tagging along with a big shot, he thought.

Before Zhang Chengling could fully take in what he meant, they heard a clueless Cao Weining lamented beside them. "I always feel like you two being together is a little strange, considering that you are both men; but after today I have finally understood: Being men or women has nothing to do with someone who is able to understand you with a mere few words, someone who can complete you like a pair of immortal soulmates."

He continued smugly. "There is a poem that goes as such: 'What is love, O world? That makes those birds swear a bond 'till their death?'⁸² The cherry blossom pond was thousands of miles deep, but can't be compared...'⁸³" He couldn't remember what it was that it couldn't compare to, and turned incredibly embarrassed. Since he tried his hardest but couldn't recall anything else, he said the rest under his breath and commented, "This poem by Sir Du Fu, though somewhat hard to understand, is still a very moving piece."

Zhang Chengling and Wen Kexing looked at him with odd expressions.

Wen Kexing only replied after a good while. "Qing Feng Sect educates such well-rounded disciples, how admirable."

Cao Weining, modest as he was, smiled sheepishly at the praise. "It's nothing. My Master says that reading to people in jianghu is pointless anyway, and there's no hope that anyone will ever pass the court official examination with flying colors; it's enough to know a few words here and there and one should focus on honing their kungfu instead. I only read a book or two, that's just my shallow understanding."

Wen Kexing felt like this "shallow understanding" was actually quite fascinating.

The two brought Zhang Chengling back to a Zhao Jing who had almost gone mad out of worry. The elder asked him anything and everything while Wen Kexing turned a blind eye; this old man might be a sly fox but he did have concern for his late friend's son. He silently left, but the moment his back was facing them, he saw someone staring right at him.

Wen Kexing stopped walking, and in that man's eyes there was an insidious light glinting, like that of a mad dog that was about to pounce. Wen Kexing saw Cao

⁸² From the poem 摸魚兒 - 雁丘/Birds' Grave, by Yuan Haowen.

⁸³ From the poem 贈汪倫/For Wang Lun, by Li Bai.

Weining greeting him respectfully, and knew that was his Uncle Master – the infamous ill-tempered Mo Huaikong of Qing Feng Sect.

Mo Huaikong was listening to Cao Weining rambling and looked to the direction the young man was pointing at to face Wen Kexing. At first glance he felt a sense of familiarity; then those deep, dark eyes caused him a pinch of alarm, but he couldn't pinpoint why.

In his astonishment, he saw Wen Kexing smile back at him. He grunted when Cao Weining started to describe how well-acquainted he was with another man, sensing that this Wen Kexing was no good at all.

He turned to shout at Cao Weining, “Will you stop it already?”

Cao Weining swallowed the rest of his words, wishing he could sew his mouth shut.

—

Only at night fall did Zhou Zishu finish with his meals. He was leaning on the tavern's balcony rails, taking small sips of wine when someone walked in and said something to the person sitting in the table next to him; both then paid for their food and left. Zhou Zishu opened his eyes wider as he realized half of the tavern was gone already. He pulled a random young man to his side and asked, “What happened?”

“We just got news that the Gao's Manor has successfully captured a Ghost, and they are going to do a public execution!”

Zhou Zishu's brows creased. Gao Chong had captured a Ghost? At this moment he no longer had doubts about the Ghosts' appearance, but what was the Ghost Valley's intention for doing all of this?

Those were the ones who had caused despicable crimes when they were still living among others and had to enter the Valley to seek refuge; wouldn't they be afraid of acting in broad daylight again?

Was the Lapis Armor really hiding some kind of big secret, so terrible that it could lure even the Ghosts out of the Valley and make the well-spoken Sir Gao clam up and use such a stupid trick to divert people's attention?

Still deep in thoughts, Zhou Zishu knocked into someone on his way downstairs. He muttered an apology, but once looking up, he was stunned: It was the disciple of Monk Gu with his otherworldly aura.

There was a sudden thought popping up in his head: Even he has to consume rice after all?

Monk Gu's disciple said, "It's nothing," and smoothed down his clothes. He took the initiative, "I heard the young man from Qing Feng said that you were the one who escorted the Zhang's descendant to Tai Hu? A pleasure to meet you, my name is Ye Baiyi.⁸⁴"

He was not at all similar to Gao Chong, who was a much more sociable individual. Around him was an air of detachment from every mortal matter – almost made him feel like he didn't exist. Not to mention, there was also a strange feeling of dissonant about him.

Zhou Zishu was surprised and puzzled that such a person would speak to him first, so he habitually resorted to empty pleasantries as replies.

Ye Baiyi paid no mind to those, looking at him with indifference. His next sentence was, "I see that your breathing is stagnant and your movements are heavy; whatever you're burdened with is now beyond cure. But how strange is it that someone like you can possess such a vital spirit?"

Zhou Zishu fell silent. He felt like this man must have cultivated his immortal aura in Mount Chang Ming for so long that he no longer spoke the human way, just like his master.

After some thoughts, Ye Baiyi inquired further, "How much time do you have left, three years? Two years?"

At this topic, Zhou Zishu felt like neither refusal nor acquiescence was the right answer. He smiled stiffly, "How keen-eyed you are, Brother Ye, no wonder..."

It was as if Ye Baiyi was wearing filtering nets on his ears as he shot down all of that nonsense. He didn't wait for Zhou Zishu to finish before replying, "Everyone who are near death will at least show some signs⁸⁵ and have to endure suffering beyond words, but you're still here indulging in luxuries. This shows that you definitely have some serious experience under your belt – since when did such individuals emerge in our pugilist scene..." Then he turned and walked away, completely ignoring Zhou Zishu.

After having left a great distance between them, he seemed to remember something and turned his head back towards the man behind him, "If you don't mind, treat me to wine some day."

⁸⁴ 白衣 (báiyī) means "white clothes".

⁸⁵ 天人将死 refers to the dying symptoms called 五衰.

As if doing that would be my one of my greatest life achievements or something, Zhou Zishu thought silently.

He followed the majority of people to the Gao's Manor to see what this legendary "Ghost" was all about, and saw nothing but an middle-age fierce-looking man being tied up in front of them—so this was what it felt like to watch a public execution. The Ghost's upper body was naked intentionally to show the feral ghost face on his back, indicating that this one must be the real deal.

While Zhou Zishu was spacing out, a hand quietly landed on his shoulder. Wen Kexing appeared out of nowhere, smiling at him sweetly, "I've looked for you all day, where did you go?"

Ignoring the question, Zhou Zishu pointed to the man, "Do you think he's a real Ghost or not?"

"Hm?" Wen Kexing looked at that direction he was pointing to, disagreeing, "The ghost face indicates that one is no longer able to show his face in broad daylight, who would casually tattoo it on their back without reasons? Though, this unfortunate pal could also have caused offence to someone and that person could have framed him and thrown him out here to execute publicly."

His words were casual, but many things were revealed to Zhou Zishu: Tattooing the ghost face required a special pigment from a plant called the "Nether plant", which only existed in the Ghost Valley.

Furthermore, not everyone who entered the Ghost Valley survived – just like not all spirits of the dead could reincarnate or turn into ghosts, they might very well suffer being eradicated completely from the world. That place was an exclusively dog-eat-dog world, and you had to be vigilant of your surroundings to remain alive and earn yourself such a tattoo.

Zhou Zishu stared at the tattooed man pensively. At that moment, the tension was palpable among the crowd, and someone of Hua Shan Sect had suggested burning this person alive.

He suddenly turned away, making his way through the crowd and left briskly.

Chapter 25 - Baiyi

Wen Kexing was way more interested in the other man than this currently-being-hanged Ghost, so when the former left, he immediately followed. But his steps halted, as the man who was just standing here a few minutes ago had vanished without a trace. Wen Kexing scanned through the big crowd.

Zhou Zishu was like a drop of water in a big ocean; the moment one lost sight of him, his existence would be impossible to be detected. Wen Kexing felt a sense of bewilderment, his eyes narrowed. He scanned the crowd again in concentration, unable to accept defeat; but the other man had really just up and disappeared in front of him like that.

In his heart blossomed an unspeakable feeling that was somewhat akin to how people felt when something slipped away from their grasp, and for some unknown reasons mixed with a little anger.

Even if Wen Kexing successfully cracked the mystery that was his identity and inner thoughts, that man could just disappear anytime he wanted.

He — the one who managed to escape the labyrinth that was Tian Chuang's — was the most slippery eel one could find on Earth.

Leaving Wen Kexing behind, Zhou Zishu visited a counting house.

In the Dong Ting area, or perhaps the entirety of Jiangnan, there was a famously modest counting house called the “Ping An House”. It was a fairly successful business but never draw too much attention to itself or planned on expanding to other regions. It seemed like the owner had no big ambitions and was contented to operate in this prosperous land.

After looking up at the house's signboard, Zhou Zishu went inside. A voice rang out, “Welcome! Do you want to exchange banknotes or...”

Zhou Zishu went past the assistant to reach the shopkeeper himself. He spoke softly with a faint smile. “I want to ask Sir Song for a favor, could you contact your supervisor for me?”

The shopkeeper startled, lifting his head to examine Zhou Zishu. After a good while, he spoke cautiously. “And you are?”

Zhou Zishu lowered his voice even further. “I'm an old acquaintance of your “Lord Seventh”, last name Zhou.”

The man's expressions changed immediately upon hearing “Lord Seventh” from him and became more serious. He took a few steps forward and guided him to sit

down himself. He stood beside him and said in a respectful tone while telling the assistant to serve him tea. “Of course, of course, I shall contact Sir Song immediately. Although I’m not sure if he is still in Dong Ting right now... Is it alright for you to wait for a few days?”

Zhou Zishu nodded. “No need to hurry, and you should sit down too.”

He asked the shopkeeper in a very gracious way, but the man kept frantically waving his hands as denial. He asked, “Sir Zhou, about your business with my superior, do you want to speak to him directly or do you want me to do something for you beforehand?”

After some thoughts, Zhou Zishu replied, “There’s nothing else that I can think of, but have you ever heard about a thing called the Lapis Armor?”

That took the man by surprise. “This... I did know a bit. Are you talking about the Lapis Armor that is made of the five broken pieces of lapis lazuli?”

Zhou Zishu nodded. “Yes.”

The shopkeeper fell into deep thought. After a while, he took out a piece of paper and wrote “Lapis Armor” on it. “I’m afraid my knowledge of it will not be sufficient. I hope you don’t mind waiting for another few days, as I think I do have some ways to dig up more information.”

Zhou Zishu examined the man. He looked like he could be anything from thirty to forty, clever face, spoke slowly and carefully with definite consideration in each word; that fox clearly taught his folks well. Once he had no idea how much power and influence his old friend had after he left the capital, but after seeing this, he was certain it would not merely be contained in these simple counting houses.

A cup of tea later, he left. Who could have ever thought that the former leader of Tian Chuang now had to rely on others for intel, or to ask for that person’s help just to protect the life of that Zhang Chengling brat — though, it was also worth noting that Zhou Zishu had no idea why he was helping him when they were just strangers. How did the kid’s life concern him anyway?

A fool’s errand, that was what.

But throughout a person’s life there was bound to be incidents like this, where you couldn’t help but insert yourself in other people’s business. Is this ultimately my fate? Zhou Zishu thought. How else could he have come across the kid in this vast land of Jiangnan?

He walked leisurely along the main road, sunbathing since there was nothing else for him to do. He only visited a tavern after having feasted his eyes on the scenic view

of Dong Ting with satisfaction and when the sun was starting to go down. He ordered a pot of wine and some dishes, thinking about how today was really good to him. It was as if he never had such a good day like this in his entire life – before today he was either miserable himself or spent time planning on how to make others' life miserable.

There was a young lady playing a zither nearby; the beauty complimented the music all too well. Everyone cheered for her after the song ended, and Zhou Zishu—enjoying both beauty and song very much—put a silver ingot on the plate. The girl was initially dumbstruck, then she smiled, bowed at him and said her gratitude in a soft voice. That lifted Zhou Zishu's mood incredibly.

All of a sudden, there was someone sitting in the seat opposite him. They said matter-of-factly, "I'm here so that you can treat me wine."

Zhou Zishu tensed up—his debt collector was finally here.

Ye Baiyi was not at all gracious about this. To him, he was already lowering his standards to stand these vulgar indulgence like food and wine, so it was natural for the other person to greet him with trepidation. Ignoring Zhou Zishu, he began ordering hoards after hoards of food himself, then spoke calmly, "Please have anything you like, don't be reserved."

Zhou Zishu gave him an odd look, How are you seeing any ounce of reservation in me?

He was starting to suspect that this person was here to deliberately trick him. The amount of food he just ordered could very well feed two pigs and not two humans.

Seeing that he wanted to order no more, Ye Baiyi suddenly realized, "Oh, right, you're injured so you don't have an appetite for all this. But my advice is that you should eat as much as you can, seeing that you don't have much time left."

The odd look in Zhou Zishu's eyes intensified. If this man wasn't Monk Gu's disciple, he could have made a great career out of being other people's punching bag.

At that moment, another figure walked up to the table ostentatiously and pulled a chair next to them, completely uninvited. He examined Ye Baiyi without showing any emotions. "Ah-Xu, I was just wondering why you disappeared without a goodbye, but it seems like you're... occupied with another man?"

Just like that, Zhou Zishu's good mood caused by the young lady's smile died out; internally he began to debate whether he should stand up and leave with a "Please help yourself, it's time for me to go". Wen Kexing turned his head, seemingly gritting the words through his teeth. "Who is he?"

“He’s...” He was about to say that the man was an acquaintance he met by chance, but mysteriously, words failed him and he felt strange. Unsure why an explanation was necessary, his strange expressions faded.

Ye Baiyi, in contrast, nodded at Wen Kexing’s direction as he replied in an easygoing manner. “My name is Ye Baiyi.”

Wen Kexing gave him a false smile and turned away, about to say something but was cut off by Ye Baiyi. “I know you, you were the one who set fire to the Zhang child’s room that day.” He said without a care.

Zhou Zishu’s hand with his cup of wine froze in mid-air, and Wen Kexing’s smiling expressions vanished. He stared at Ye Baiyi as if staring at a dead thing, with bone-chilling murderous intent circling around him.

Zhou Zishu shivered and furrowed his brows.

The waiter who brought them food right at that moment was scared shitless by his vicious aura and almost dropped the plates. In split seconds he saw a blur, and the dishes that he almost dropped were now completely safe in the hands of the gentleman in white.

Even Zhou Zishu’s vision could not make out his movements clearly.

Was Ye Baiyi really that strong? If he was Monk Gu’s disciple, then what would this say about his infamous Master...

Cold sweat broke out on Zhou Zishu’s back as he found out that whatever information Tian Chuang had gathered about the incredibly mysterious Monk Gu might not be correct after all.

Wen Kexing’s pupils contracted; even though he showed no fear on his face, he also withdrew his bloodlust. He examined the white-clothed young man—this person was only... twenty-six? No, it was possible that this youthful skin was only a disguise of his true age, he could be around thirty perhaps? No, doesn’t sound plausible, either...

He carried on himself the same feeling that his name gave: Emptiness. When he sat there unmoved, he looked like a fake human, preventing others from both reading the change in his emotions and using their own sentiments to influence him. He was sitting right next to them, but seemed like he was existing in another world.

Ye Baiyi paid no mind to how strong of a reaction he had drawn from both of them and buried himself under all the food. With each new plate, Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing’s expressions continue to twist—

This disciple of Monk Gu had an endless stomach!

He stuffed food into his mouth at lightning's speed, and even though his movements weren't boorish, the sight could be described as "a hurricane just went past the table". He devoured food like he hadn't had anything in his belly for eight lifetimes, his chopsticks flying around incessantly, leaving nothing for others. Zhou Zishu who didn't have an appetite in the first place, and Wen Kexing who didn't even come here for food, were entranced by this enthusiasm and motivated to taste some themselves, to see what kind of delicacy this tavern was serving.

Only when there was an awful mess of plates left on the table like the aftermath of a war did Ye Baiyi put down his chopsticks and wiped his mouth in satisfaction. His lips curved and there seemed to be a proper smile on his face. He said to Zhou Zishu, "Thank you for treating me."

With nothing else to be said, he stood up and left.

Zhou Zishu had a sudden thought about how incredible Monk Gu was for being able to raise such an individual.

Wen Kexing abruptly spoke up. "What he just said... I didn't want to..."

He stopped, a little spaced out. He was unsure why he was saying this, and his chest seemed to tighten. After quickly glancing at Zhou Zishu, looking down and smiling in self-mockery, he returned to his usual self. "That's Monk Gu's disciple? I see that he's more like a locust dressed in white."

Zhou Zishu lifted his wine pot and poured himself the last drops. He didn't mention the fire.

He knew without doubt that if Wen Kexing ever wanted to kill Zhang Chengling, that would be as easy to him as crushing an ant; there was no need to create a whole commotion with the fire and choose the moment one was absent to execute it. It was not a case of malice, but rather a warning.

The problem was: How did Ye Baiyi know about this?

Although, there was a whole other matter he was reminded of... Zhou Zishu searched his chest pocket, expressions changing comically. He looked up. "About this... do you bring enough silver?"

Wen Kexing stared back at him.

Volume Two. After One Stepped Down, Another Would Step Up

Chapter 26 - Lord Seventh

The lush green of trees that stayed flourishing year-round, the bright prosperity, the birds that passed by, the ranges of mountains extended up and down uninterrupted, like the curve of a beauty's back.

This place was South Xinjiang.

Under an old tree that had to be at least a hundred years old sat a South Xinjiang boy with perfect posture; he was around ten and was doing assignments. He might be young but his determination was bursting, as he had been focused for two hours now, looking like nothing could disrupt his work.

Next to the table was a deck chair arranged horizontally, and on it was a man resting with his eyes closed. He was dressed in robes like someone from the central land, and between his thighs was an old open book.

At the man's feet was a small sable. Being ignored by everyone, it chased its own tail in boredom.

At that moment, a warrior walked to them, letter in hand. Seeing the sight before him, his steps got quieter and he waited by the side in silence.

The man on the deck chair opened his eyes. He looked halfway over twenties, his long narrow eyes⁸⁶ carrying a hint of amusement. When he looked around, he was truly an exceptional beauty. The small sable nimbly jumped into his embrace and climbed up his shoulders, its tail stroking his chin.

The warrior presented the letter with politeness. "My Lord, it is a letter from Head Butler Song."

⁸⁶ The original phrase literally translates to "peach blossom eyes." In physiognomy, this eye shape indicates that a person is often more alluring but also more scandalous.

“Lord Seventh” uttered a word in assent and opened the letter with only mild interest, but halfway through reading, he abruptly sat up, the look in his eyes sobering, “Is it really him?”

The small sable upon seeing the mysterious paper in front of it reached out its claws, but was held back by its owner by the neck and gently thrown onto the table by which the boy was sitting.

Only then did he raised his head, “Who is it, father?”

The man didn’t answer right away. He stood up and took two steps forward, leisurely folding the letter while talking about something completely off-topic, “Lu Ta, did you remember what I told you last time about the principle of this world, about how division precedes unity and vice versa like a circle?”

The young man seemed to be used to his father’s habit of speaking nonsense before reaching the focal point, so he played along. “You say that it is simply like how after sitting for a long time, one has to stand up, and when they can’t stand anymore they sit down again. There is no philosophy to it, just that us humans are born to suffer.”

A satisfied smile appear on the man’s face, and he said to the dazed South Xinjiang warrior, “Axinlai, go find your Great Shaman for me and ask him if he thinks what I said is reasonable.”

Axinlai’s face was of pure confusion. “Huh?”

The man was about to say something when they heard a small laugh and a gentle voice, “Are you so unoccupied to the point of wanting to stir up troubles?”

The man who just came in was dressed in black from head to toe, carrying a scepter that was also solid black. Upon seeing him, Axinlai bowed, “Great Shaman.”

The shaman muttered a word of acknowledgement and gestured at him. “Go do your work—Beiyuan, don’t always make fun of good-natured people.”

The man named Beiyuan gave him the folded letter while still smiling, “Guess who has graced our shop with their holy presence?”

The shaman didn’t feel particularly intrigued, but he received it anyway with a grunt, “As long as it’s not the Emperor of Da Qing... Hm? Lord Zhou?”

On the other man’s face was a smile that carried no good intentions at all, “My little venom, how about we pay Zhongyuan a visit? Since our old friend has asked for help, isn’t it natural that we should put our lives on the line for him if possible?”

The shaman looked at the other man's mischievous face without saying anything, but internally he knew the other clearly just wanted to watch chaos happen while "helping" his friend.

Zhou Zishu, not knowing he had signed his fate for having such an acquaintance, was currently distressed about a very materialistic matter—"Giant's Stomach" Ye Baiyi's presence had left him with a money problem.

After the short staring contest with Wen Kexing, Zhou Zishu came to a realization: If Wen Kexing was reliable then sows could climb trees. He must have possessed terrible luck to be running into both a big eater and a freeloader, how great.

Wen Kexing, seeing that Zhou Zishu's gaze had turned sour, couldn't help but tighten his clothes around him. He said in a small voice, "I only sell my entertainment value and not my body, you must not leave me here."

Zhou Zishu asked, "So what are you going to do now?"

Wen Kexing said, "Since you're the one who treated us, you should sell yourself instead."

Zhou Zishu gritted out, "I'm not a fucking maiden, will you buy me if I do sell myself then?"

Wen Kexing's eyes immediately brightened, "Of course, I will buy you even if I have to sell away all of my fortunes!"

Zhou Zishu lowered his voice, "Can you sell all of your fortunes to pay for this meal first then?"

After a stretch of silence, Wen Kexing finally replied, "Ah-Xu, how about we just run?"

Zhou Zishu turned his face away without a word. He might have done some rogue-like activities to earn some cash, but there was still some conscience left in him; leaving without paying for a meal was very much against his code of conduct, and... He looked at Wen Kexing's openly brazen face, and there's this despicable man.

The moment his face turned, he saw someone walking in. Zhou Zishu's spirit was revived as he called out, "How coincidental, Young Miss Gu!"

The moment Gu Xiang heard it and saw the two of them, her face turned green with fear. She was going to leave immediately, but she was not as fast as Wen Kexing. The man was already standing in front of her and asked serenely, "Ah-Xiang, why are you running?"

A pale Gu Xiang managed to reply, “Mas... Master, I just... went... the wrong way.”

Wen Kexing patted her shoulder and tugged her back inside, “Don’t be shy, if you’re here then stay.”

Gu Xiang felt goose bumps breaking out on her skin, feeling like there was no way her master could harbor good intentions. But now that she couldn’t escape, she had to stay close to his every step with skittishness, her posture not unlike someone who was going to be executed. Wen Kexing led her to their table and asked, “Do you have money with you?”

Immediately Gu Xiang pulled out all she had, from silver crumbles to paper cash and gold ingots. Only now did Wen Kexing nod in contentment and shout with the confidence of a loaded man, “Show us the bill!”

Gu Xiang thought, No wonder that fortune teller told me to use my wealth to avoid bad luck, o’ merciful Buddha!

Now that she had helped them, Wen Kexing was reasonable enough to let her tag along again, no longer chasing her away. Walking ahead of them was Zhou Zishu who was deliberating something; after a while, he suddenly looked back and asked directly. “Brother Wen, why did you burn the room of the Zhang brat that night?”

Gu Xiang was alarmed, “Master, you committed arson?”

Wen Kexing said entirely seriously, “I saw an astronomical phenomenon indicating that the kid would face a great calamity and it needed fire to be quelled, so I did it right away.”

In the middle of his talk, he saw Zhou Zishu and Gu Xiang’s disdainful faces, so he added, “Acts done out of goodwill don’t need to be said out loud, don’t look at me with such adoration.”

Gu Xiang said, “Master, can you see my fate in the stars too?”

Wen Kexing replied, “There will be a great disaster happening to you if you don’t shut up for a day.”

As expected, Gu Xiang didn’t open her mouth again.

They returned to the place where the execution happened during the day. Most of the crowd had dispersed and the Ghost was nowhere to be found; it was said that his martial art skills were crippled completely, and a chain was pierced through his shoulder blades to keep him in place. They arrived when Cao Weining, accompanied by Zhang Chengling, was looking for them. “Brother Zhou, Young Brother Zhang

told me that you are his master...” He suddenly stopped talking to gape at Gu Xiang who was standing behind Wen Kexing, his mouth wide open.

Gu Xiang blinked a few times for no reasons, while Cao Weining kept staring at her stupidly.

Next to him, Zhou Zishu cleared his voice. Cao Weining was pulled out of the daze and blushed deeply, stuttering, “M- Miss... Apologies, I didn’t mean to be rude, really, just...”

Gu Xiang, unsure about what to make of that, felt like this young man was not quite right in the head. She saw Cao Weining abruptly took a few steps back while speaking with the smallest voice possible, “My last- last name is Cao, first name Weining, from Tai- Tai Hang, belonging to the “Wei” line of Qing Feng Sword Sect, my master is- is Qing Feng’s P-Patriarch Mo Huaiyang...”

After judging him once, Gu Xiang asked Wen Kexing, “Master, what’s wrong with him?”

Shattered on the ground before he could announce his entire family tree were Cao Weining’s pure, juvenile feelings that had just blossomed.

Zhou Zishu glanced at Zhang Chengling and said after some thoughts, “Over here, brat.” Seeing that the elder didn’t shun him away anymore, Zhang Chengling was overjoyed and cheerily followed him. Wen Kexing patted Cao Weining’s shoulder and went back to his room with Gu Xiang.

The moment Gu Xiang walked past him, Cao Weining could sense a waft of fragrance that muddled his brain completely. Only when they were long gone was he snapped out of the trance, and he started whispering in amazement. “Guan-guan crooned the osprey, from where amidst the water, the North was famed for having beauty... who with a gentleman would make a fated pair...⁸⁷ How can such a beautiful young maiden exist, how does...”

He walked away while still lamenting, again drowned in his infatuation.

Gu Xiang whispered to Wen Kexing once they were far away, “Master, Old Meng is also here, he wants to tell you about below...”

Wen Kexing was completely undisturbed. The corner of his lips lifted but there was no hint of a smile in his eyes. He said gently, “Even Old Meng wants to tell me what to do?”

⁸⁷ He has mixed up several poems. The first and last line are from The Song of Osprey, and the second line is from Reeds; both poems are from Confucius’s Book of Odes. The third line is from Ode to A Beauty, by Li Yannian.

“...Yes.”

Zhou Zishu silently brought Zhang Chengling to his own room. Nodding once, he said. “Sit down, I want to ask you something.”

Zhang Chengling sat, perfectly well-behaved. “What do you want to know, shifu?”

Zhou Zishu mused before asking, “Did the man with the mark of a hand on his face whom you met that day ask you about whether you had come across a man with a finger missing?”

Zhang Chengling nodded. Zhou Zishu asked again. “So have you met him?”

Zhang Chengling shook his head. “Shifu, who is that man?”

Not giving the younger an answer, Zhou Zishu crossed his legs, index finger lightly tapping his one of his knees. Xue Fang the Hanged Ghost was rumored to have lost a finger, that was why he knew the man in black who Gu Xiang killed in the abandoned shrine was not him.

But what was the intention of the red-clothed Delighted Mourning Ghost?

After a while, he spoke slowly with unusual seriousness. “Try to remember it more clearly, kiddo, did you see anything out of the ordinary that night?”

By “that night”, he meant the night the entire Zhang family was murdered. Zhang Chengling’s breath quickened, and Zhou Zishu softened his voice even further. “Don’t rush things, just think it over carefully. I’m afraid that memory might be very important.”

Zhang Chengling paled. After a good while, he shook his head while replying in a choked voice, “Shifu, you ask me whether there was something unusual, but wasn’t that entire night an unusual event?”

Zhou Zishu’s brows furrow and he no longer pushed him further. After a bout of grave silence, he said. “I’m going to teach you a mnemonic rhyme; you have to try to comprehend it yourself and utilize it to further your cultivation. You can come to me if there is any confusion.”

Zhang Chengling was dumbfounded.

Zhou Zishu added. “You shouldn’t leave Sir Zhao’s side during the coming days, and must not act on your own or leave the Gao’s manor, do you understand?”

Zhang Chengling’s eyes widened. “Shifu... Thank you, shifu!”

Zhou Zishu awkwardly coughed and scolded him, “Stop speaking nonsense and remember what I’m going to say, I will not repeat it for a second time.”

Chapter 27 - Slaughter

He knew he was in a dream, but the sight before him was too real to be so. The Northern wind grazed his mask, but he didn't feel the cold. He had been waiting there for so, so long with utmost calmness, his pulse even slower than usual. The sun was done traversing the sky, and the night was falling.

Zhou Zishu watched all of it, detached from everything as a habit. He didn't know how to view himself as a human—someone with emotions, with a sense of right and wrong. It was for his own self-preservation; as long as he acted without thinking, he wouldn't be driven to insanity.

He was merely a pair of bloody hands on which the kingdom of Da Qing rested. Prosperity was like beautifully decorated sleeves, and his hands were forever hidden inside of them, making it difficult for people to really see him. Until the rotten age of war was over and peace reigned over the people, another chapter in history would begin...

Zhou Zishu lowered his head. The face of the person in his dream was hazy, but he thought he could still see the features that belonged to a little girl—she was held in the nanny's arms like an innocent, helpless lamb while her protector never strayed from her task with a desperate expression on her face.

The young girl looked up and said in a tiny voice. "My father is a good person, my big brother is also a good person, I'm also a good person, we're all good people, you shouldn't kill us."

He remembered. During the reign of the late Emperor, to deal a killing blow to the Second Prince, Tian Chuang was ordered to assassinate the entire family of court official Sir Jiang Zheng, who was recently fired from his position and was planning to leave the capital. Sir Jiang's daughter Jiang Xue was only four years old, an incredibly smart girl. How would she have turned out to be if she ever got a chance to grow up?

Zhou Zishu felt his hands raised, then a shrill feminine scream pierced the night sky. The sword went through her chest, then through the little girl's body. There was no disgust or grief, for he had been used to it ever since he came into his position.

Did it matter whether people were kind-hearted or loyal? There was never a law that forbade good people to have their lives taken away.

But he heard a drawn-out sigh in the air; someone was saying, An eye for an eye—

Sharp pain spiked in his chest as he startled awake and sat up.

With excruciating motions, he bent forward and clutched at his chest, teeth gritted to reign in the pained noises. His fingers gripped a corner of the blanket tightly,

knuckles white; his hair wild, entire appearance miserable. Amidst the organ-crushing agony, he dazedly thought, Look, Zhou Zishu you damning bastard, you're going to die as well.

Tonight, sleep denied Zhou Zishu, Wen Kexing and Ye Baiyi.

Wen Kexing, instead of going outside, sat facing the window in silence. Gu Xiang stood beside him, solemnity graced her usually ingenuous countenance. She looked out to see a gloomy night sky that had never been any different from the past, the stillness making her look like an obscure lantern.

The open window let the chilly wind in, and Gu Xiang's clothes and hair fluttered. The erotic book on the table was also turned a few pages under the wind, creating rustling sounds. Wen Kexing allowed a slow smile to spread over his face and spoke softly, "I have waited for this for twenty years."

Gu Xiang only looked at him in silence. The smile on his face showed inconceivable relief that bordered on maniacal glee. With no source of light around, he almost didn't look human, prompting reverence in her.

Wen Kexing's hand reached out and made a grabbing motion, seemingly wanting to catch the wind. "My wish is that there won't be any forces standing in my way, whether they are humans or ghosts, or immortals, or demons... I want the world to be rid of them and they will be thrown back to Hell where they belong."

In his other hand was a piece of paper. Gu Xiang's gaze stopped at that yellowed slip, on which a face of a ghost was scrawled messily – it looked like the work of a child. Wen Kexing stood up and lit a candle, hovering the paper above it until it was burned into ashes.

His expression was of pure worship.

Ye Baiyi slept until he was jerked out of his dream for an unknown reason. There was a distinct lack of disorientation in his eyes that should be typical of someone who had just woken up. He remained in bed facing up, hands slowly lifting the strange pendant on his neck to view it. Taking a closer look, one could see that the jewelry was expertly crafted, and was an exact miniature of the Realm's Command.

Ye Baiyi closed his eyes, muttering, "Changqing, I always have a bad feeling about this, why aren't you here anymore..."

Would the world be so much more peaceful if the Command, the Ghost Valley, the Lapis Armor and Tian Chuang ceased to exist?

The next morning, beside the sunlight, everyone was greeted with dead bodies.

There were nine in total, arranged in a circle in a location not far away from the Gao's Manor; in the middle there was the word "Ghost" written in blood. The whole scene spread nearly ten meters wide, blocking an entire street and seemed to be right at the place a Ghost was executed just yesterday's morning.

When Zhou Zishu got there, most corpses had been identified. The Ghosts were fair enough to make sure every sect received equal "blessing": There was one body for each of the eight sects plus the Gao family, ranging in different gender, age and status.

One of them was Gao Chong's disciple. Zhou Zishu didn't have a distinct impression of this person beside that he was not as outstanding as Deng Kuan and of the silent type; he helped out the guests occasionally and didn't say much. Gao Xiaolian cried to the point of almost passing out, but in favor of inspecting the bodies with Abbot Ci Mu, Gao Chong ignored his treasured daughter and left Deng Kuan with her.

One had a silk thread across their neck, one was struck by the Bloody Palms, one was drained of blood, one was cut up into parts... Each death seemed to have a different cause.

Zhou Zishu heard someone sighing next to him. "The Ghosts of Qingzhu Ridge are all crawling out of the nest."

His head turned and he saw Ye Baiyi. Zhou Zishu was surprised to see a faint layer of sorrow on his face, making him look like a porcelain Guanyin⁸⁸ statue.

On instinct, Zhou Zishu asked, "What?"

Ye Baiyi cast him a glance, his face expressionless still, "Are you deaf?"

Immediately, Zhou Zishu turned away before he could embarrass himself further. Ye Baiyi's hand landed on his shoulder, and he spoke like how one would speak to a close acquaintance, "Come outside tonight, I want to show you this place." The tone of his voice was not unlike that of Zhou Zishu when he talked to Zhang Chengling last night.

Zhou Zishu decided that he would ignore this man until he learned how to speak like a normal human again, but unbridledly, he nodded.

⁸⁸ In Chinese mythology, Guanyin was adopted from Buddhism (originally a bodhisattva known as Avalokiteśvara), and is generally regarded as a figure of compassion.

He immediately regretted it afterwards and wished he could remove his annoying head from his body. He started to evaluate whether it was worth appeasing his soul to kill a disciple of Monk Gu right now to cover his tracks.

Suddenly, there was a voice from the crowd. “Why are these individuals murdered? Every one of us publicly condemn the Ghost Valley, and the Ghosts had blended in with us without anyone knowing, so why did they target those nine only? Are they really that stupid to wage war against the entire pugilist scene? Or are some of you hiding something from us?”

Gao Chong stood up upon hearing that, wan and haggard at first glance. He seemed to stumble a little, but as Deng Kuan rushed to his side, he pushed away the assistance. His eyes scanned the currently enraged sects, then darted to those who were whispering with doubts.

His gaze seemed to carry a weight and cause everyone to quiet down completely.

Then they saw him, a legend among martial artists for over twenty-five years now with his graying hair and solemn face, murmuring slowly. “This is a debt of blood.”

Gao Chong lowered his head to stare at the nine corpses. He raised his voice. “This is a debt of blood... A debt that they owe the Gao family, a debt that they owe all the sects, the world... A bloody debt that they owe anyone with conscience!”

He seemed to have trouble breathing for a second. Abbot Ci Mu turned the prayer beads in his hands and said “Amitabha Budhha” before closing his eyes and muttering prayers for the dead. Deng Kuan looked at his old Master with worry; he still wanted to help him but repressed the urge as he considered the act to be disrespectful.

When Gao Chong looked up, tears welled in his eyes. He pointed to the dead body who belonged to his family. “This disciple of mine was orphaned when he was little, and when he joined the family he took my last name, he was called Gao Hui. He didn’t talk much and was teased by other kids, they called him Old Shut-in...”

He looked like he wanted to laugh but couldn’t. The female disciples of the Gao’s Manor were already bawling their eyes out.

After pausing for a bit, he continued. “This little shut-in was a good kid, you must have seen him in the past few days, he was so innocent and honest... but a good kid nonetheless, always worked hard, never threw a fit. He had a grandmother who adopted him from the streets, she’s over eighty now. She is blind and hard-of-hearing, can’t really recognize anyone but her grandson, and that is only sometimes... You see, how am I gonna tell her the news? Everyone, you’re all chivalrous heroes, please have mercy on me and tell me how I can tell her about this!”

The autumn wind in Dong Ting rustled loudly, and dead silence spread over the scene. Gao Chong, an old and respected figure, was bowing to them with his hands in front, pleading with them—how can I tell her about this?

Even a rude mouth like Feng Xiaofeng clammed up. At this point, if anyone dared utter an unnecessary syllable, they should be considered to be below an animal.

Hua Qingsong, the newly appointed Patriarch of Tai Shan Sect, was the first to speak up. “Until the Ghosts are exterminated, this world will not know peace. From now on, our Tai Shan Sect is under Sir Gao’s command, this is our promise! We will lay our lives on the line to avenge our former Patriarch, to avenge the deaths of our innocent fellow disciples!”

After the Patriarch of Tai Shan’s sudden death, the sect was left without a leader, and Hua Qingsong was only an overeager man in his twenties. He had no idea that once he had spoken, other big sects had no choice but to follow suit and show their stance.

In the afternoon of the same day, under Gao Chong’s direction, a grand funeral was held for the dead. The sky of Dong Ting was permeated with sobriety like there was a plague happening; all activities in town were slowed down.

Gao Chong was a capable man, who had united everyone who was previously only acting on their own impulses.

At night, after Zhou Zishu had sent Zhang Chengling off—the boy snuck out again to see him—he was greeted with an uninvited guest that was Ye Baiyi. The man was so indifferent that he didn’t bother to wear clothes that would help him blend in the night; he shamelessly knocked on the window and called, “You, follow me.”

It was too late to execute his murder plan, so Zhou Zishu followed him outside.

In the room next to his, Wen Kexing already heard everything happening. His arms crossed and he frowned, face sour.

Gu Xiang, who was closing her eyes and hanging upside down from a beam on the roof, was woken by him. She yawned and asked, “Master, you said from the beginning that this Zhou Xu had a mysterious background and was more than he seemed, and you were worried that he would ruin your plan. It’s only been a few days since you started following him, how are you already changing to keeping tabs on him all the time?”

Chapter 28 - Monk Gu

Wen Kexing gave her a cold look, voice venomous, “What makes you think you can interfere with my business?”

His tone was so unusually cruel that it took Gu Xiang by surprise; her eyes widened and she jumped down from the ceiling. She started following Wen Kexing since she was little, and she knew that while he took important matters very seriously, it didn't mean that he wouldn't allow some joking around. Gu Xiang bantering with him was a frequent practice and he never showed any disapproval, so she didn't understand what this was about.

Gu Xiang examined him warily, voice soft, “Master, this...”

Wen Kexing fell silent, then inhaled after a good while, still feeling incredibly irritated. He casually leaned on the window to enjoy the chilly wind and said to Gu Xiang in a bland voice, “Say, according to you apparently I'm not at all interested in women, can only bed handsome men and harm those who don't look that good? Can't I have a friend or two just to talk to?”

He didn't intend to scare Gu Xiang, but the girl had no idea what he wanted from her so she only became terrified. She stammered, “Yes, Master, I was wrong.”

Whatever Wen Kexing was about to say was swallowed once he saw Gu Xiang's lost look. Talking to her was such a chore since they weren't on the same wavelength. In some ways, he felt an accumulating amount of sadness at himself; these days, the lot he was surrounded with was either scared of him or thought that he was a stubborn madman. Not many would have sat with him by the fire like that, listened to him singing off-key like that, talked about old stories that only he could understand like that.

He suddenly asked, “Ah-Xiang, do you think I'm crazy?”

Gu Xiang was stunned, and looked at him hesitantly. Seeing the dull calmness on his face without any trace of anger, she nervously nodded. Wen Kexing turned away and scoffed.

After some thinking, Gu Xiang added, “I'm following you even if you are.”

“And why do you want to follow a madman?”

Gu Xiang tried her hardest to formulate her thoughts. Even when she was a child, she refused to study, which was even a greater joy when no one forced her into it; so now what she knew was very little. At this moment she realized having some kind of education was useful after all, since she had so much she wanted to say but didn't know where to start.

In the end, she blurted out, “Who cares if you’re mad, I still think you’re a thousand times better than others.”

Wen Kexing looked at her. After a while, a smile spread across his face.

Upon that smile which seemed to carry loneliness, Gu Xiang felt a prickling sensation inside, so she continued without restraint, “Master, I think... you’re actually a great person.”

Wen Kexing laughed out loud and nodded, “Good, after all of your bullshit tonight you’ve finally speak the human tongue again.” Then he pushed open the window and jumped outside.

Gu Xiang asked, “Master, where are you going?”

Wen Kexing waved his arms, “Ye Baiyi isn’t the trustworthy type, that pale face of his can only spell trouble. I’m gonna go see how the silly little Zhou is doing against that man, I’m worried about him.”

He disappeared before Gu Xiang could answer him. After coming back to her senses, she finally realized who “silly little Zhou” was and brightened as she murmured, “Now I finally know how it is to lie without even blinking, silly little Zhou... silly little... if he’s really that then I’m the stupidest girl on Earth.”

It was perhaps unfortunate that no one had heard her, otherwise she would have received a comment on that – she might see it only as a self-deprecating joke, but there was definitely some truth in it.

Ye Baiyi didn’t told Zhou Zishu the purpose of getting both of them out here at midnight. With his lightning-fast qinggong, it was as if he was flying past the shadow. Zhou Zishu realized with astonishment that if the other man wasn’t intentionally waiting for him then he would have been left in the dust long ago.

They chased after each other like that for a long period of time before Ye Baiyi stopped, hands behind his back, his profile facing Zhou Zishu. The latter had no idea why he was brought to this empty intersection, but there was one guess. He stood a few steps away, examining the man in silence.

Ye Baiyi didn’t elaborate, leaving him to his scrutinization. This man had a sturdy stature, and usually when someone wore white, they would carry either an unmatched ethereal, elegant aura or a frivolous, pretentious predisposition. It would look like some of the physical weight in their body had been lifted somewhat from an outsider’s look, but this was not the case with Ye Baiyi.

In the night, he looked like an ancient Buddha statue, and for some reason, Zhou Zishu had a feeling that the man's weapon had to be a very heavy sword to compliment his unwavering stance.

After a long while, Ye Baiyi asked, "What have you discovered?"

Zhou Zishu startled, finally able to pinpoint why there was a distant feeling emanating. He lowered his head, "Please forgive this junior's terrible eyes, for I have severely disrespected you in the past few days."

Ye Baiyi, after a bout of silence, suddenly swatted his hands at Zhou Zishu's left shoulder in a sharp and brutal move; there was really no chance to reason with him.

Zhou Zishu, alarmed, flew several feet away from the ground to dodge. Ye Baiyi went after him immediately, his sleeves flared, intending to block all the important acupuncture points on his body.

Zhou Zishu had said the other's martial arts style leaned toward the "hard" way, and since he himself had lost half of his core strength, he couldn't risk a direct confrontation. He initially wanted to utilize his advanced qinggong to evade, but then he found out that it was a mistake. His opponent's attack was everywhere at the same time, and he had no leverage staying mid-air like this. As a dire solution, he kicked at Ye Baiyi's wrists.

Ye Baiyi wasn't fazed and grabbed his calf. Zhou Zishu twisted his body and used that force to slide away and fall to the ground gently. When his feet touched the earth, his expression changed and he spoke in a slow, deep voice. "What do you want, Sir?"

Ye Baiyi withdrew his attack. After judging him over, he said, "The "Enchanted Song" Qin Song was once a disciple of that damned old man, being driven out of the sect for his uselessness. He actually still retained some capability of playing instruments from his master, but all of his cultivation was destroyed with your song just like that. I first thought about how this world had already given birth to such a dangerous offspring, but turns out... Hey, rascal, you use a whip sword, correct?"

Zhou Zishu's eyes widened as he took half a step to the side, hands instinctively retracting into his sleeves. Murderous intent that was long buried now resurfaced – this was the first time he was in the kind of situation where he couldn't accurately gauge his opponent's capability, but the other man knew him all too well.

Seeing that, Ye Baiyi's lips curved up, his smile stiff and mocking, "If I wanted to do something to you, do you really think you could still stand there and talk to me? The qinggong skills you just demonstrated belong to the one-and-only "No Boundaries, No Traces" branch. Your shifu is the former lord of Si Ji Holdings, Qin Huaizhang, isn't he? Hmph, when it comes to being small-minded you two really are birds of the same feather."

Zhou Zishu replied coldly. “You are a highly respected figure in this pugilist scene, Monk Gu, but my Master had passed away long ago. This junior will not let you tarnish his reputation even if it means treating you with discourtesy.”

Ye Baiyi was taken aback, crying out, “What? Qin Huaizhang is dead?”

Zhou Zishu didn't have the chance to answer him. Ye Baiyi's gaze dimmed, his expression a little lost. He looked down. “Of course, so many years have passed... It's been so long, I don't... I don't know anything anymore... Things have changed, even Qin Huaizhang has ceased to exist.”

Zhou Zishu examined him with a frown. Upon finding out that the other man harbored no ill will and was merely speaking cryptically, he relaxed.

He was sure that the person before him was the Monk Gu of Mount Chang Ming in legends, but had no idea how he had managed to retain his youthful look throughout the years. Maybe the rumors that he had reached immortality were true after all?

Ye Baiyi held out his hand. “Let me see your sword.”

When it was met with no movement from Zhou Zishu, his tone became impatient. “You think I haven't seen that thing? It was a gift from me to your shifu way back then, and no one will bother to steal it from you, so why can't I have a look? What an incompetent disciple Qin Huaizhang has!”

That was when Zhou Zishu was reminded that there were the words “Baiyi” carved on his sword. He once thought it was some kind of mysterious motto, but turned out it was this man's name. His face turned sullen and he felt incredibly uncomfortable; involuntarily, he reached down his waist and felt around a bit before pulling out an impressive whip sword. He gave it to Ye Baiyi.

Ye Baiyi cast a quick glance at the sallow, malnourished skin of his hand. He scowled, scrutinizing him while receiving the weapon, “Always prancing around in such disgusting get-up – I hate this the most about you and your shifu.”

Zhou Zishu didn't bother firing back. Damn old geezer, he thought.

Ye Baiyi held the whip sword in his hands. The weapon, full of his core energy, began to stiffen and vibrate somewhat, making buzzing sounds. Sorrowful reminiscence flashed under Ye Baiyi's long, thin eyelashes. He looked at the “Baiyi” sword and thought, All old acquaintances were gone now; on the contrary, these objects still persevere and are now in the hands of your successors.

He gave it back to Zhou Zishu after a long while.

Zhou Zishu spoke with no indication of his true feelings, “Why do you call me out here at this hour, other than to test my background? Is there...”

He was cut off by Ye Baiyi’s palm landing on his chest, so fast that he didn’t have any time to react. If the other man had intended to kill him, he would have been utterly powerless to retaliate. He stopped talking, body stiffened.

However, Ye Baiyi didn’t do anything else but frown. Zhou Zishu felt a gentle stream of core power transmitting from the other’s hand into him, as if it was investigating inside his body. Triggered from the inside, the Nails started to act up again, causing him to break out in a cold sweat. He tried to reign it in.

Suddenly, the power multiplied; the small stream became a river, filling up his half-withered meridians. Zhou Zishu felt like the Nails were further stirred by the foreign incentive; everything went dark before his eyes as he staggered back.

There was a shadow of someone appearing behind his back, that person shouted, “What are you doing?” while catching Zhou Zishu in their hold. They raised a sleeve to bat away Ye Baiyi’s hand; and with an “Oh”, the man unabashedly clashed with them. Ye Baiyi came into contact with a strong demonic energy; it startled him and gave his chest a suffocated feeling.

Wen Kexing was even more taken aback. He just utilized a majority of his core strength in that attack, but it was met with a seemingly untraceable wall. His grip on Zhou Zishu’s waist tightened as he leaned forward a little to both cover for the man in his arms and stabilize his footing.

He then inspected Ye Baiyi, narrowed eyes entirely devoid of cheerfulness. His gaze reminded Ye Baiyi of a viper—dreadfully chilling and firmly glued to you like a maggot gnawing away one’s bones.

Chapter 29 - Belated Regrets

Ye Baiyi frowned slightly. His face looked even more fake than that of Zhou Zishu, in that it seemed like it had been staying stiff for so long and every minuscule movement looked strange. He asked. "It's you? Who are you?"

Wen Kexing smiled cruelly and asked him back. "Why don't you introduce yourself first before inquiring me? Is this how Monk Gu teaches his disciple to behave?"

Zhou Zishu, still leaning on Wen Kexing for support, was having a hard time to stand upright. He coughed drily a few times, feeling like his throat was burning. He turned his face to one side and threw up a mouthful of blood.

Seeing that, Wen Kexing's face darkened as he scolded him, "Are you stupid as well, Zhou Xu, why did you let him feel you up like that when you don't even know who he is?"

I haven't even got the chance to touch you yet! was what he didn't say out loud as he glanced at Ye Baiyi.

Zhou Zishu, busy trying to stabilise his breathing after his body being thrown into disarray by Ye Baiyi, heard nothing of Wen Kexing's nonsense. During the process, he glared at the man miserably.

Ye Baiyi asked further. "Your kungfu is not bad, whose disciple are you? And what is your relationship with this child?"

Wen Kexing finally saw the strangeness in the way the other man talked. He enunciated words very slowly like an old man, and completed with his facial expressions, he gave both an irritable and uncanny feeling.

Wen Kexing was not the thoughtless type. Now that the initial emotional impulse had worn off, doubt started to bloom in his chest.

Before he could answer, Zhou Zishu raised his sleeves to wipe the blood at the corner of his mouth, voice gentle, "What is your intention, Monk Gu?"

Ye Baiyi replied, undisturbed, "I want to see if your injuries are still salvageable." After pausing a little, he continued. "And I have never said that I'm Monk Gu, don't get ahead of yourself."

Wen Kexing was not surprised as he already knew Zhou Zishu suffered from internal injuries, but the second sentence did catch him off guard. Zhou Zishu assumed him to be Monk Gu, and while Ye Baiyi denied this, the way he referred to

that name did not at all carry a sense of respect; he talked was as if Monk Gu was his peer.

Wen Kexing couldn't help but look over Ye Baiyi's completely-not-wrinkled face once again and thought, What kind of abomination is this old man?

Ye Baiyi spoke to Zhou Zishu, "The juniors will always follow their seniors' footsteps; I know Qin Huaizhang did a totally botched job of teaching his disciples, but I advise you to stay away from this man who you don't even know well. He was even more bad news than you."

Wen Kexing felt like this man with an endless stomach was born to be his archnemesis. His chest was tight as he blurted out, "Don't even know well? Old man, have you ever heard about the concept of soulmate? You have stick your ancient nose into every single problem there is, and now you even want to dictate what we do?"

Ye Baiyi, already not an agreeable person to begin with, snarled "Are you trying to die, brat?" under his breath and charged at him.

Zhou Zishu with his unstable breathing was not at all suitable to be in the middle of this fight between these two all-around insolent men, so he cleverly retreated and sat on the top of a wall nearby to spectate and recuperate.

During this time when people were currently too worried about the Lapis Armor and the Ghost Valley to be able to sleep well, no one had any idea that in this small alley, a rarely seen clash between two martial arts masters was happening. Ye Baiyi had denied to be Monk Gu and Zhou Zishu was now unsure who he actually was; but upon seeing this unprecedented level of martial arts skills, him being Monk Gu didn't seem like a stretch at all.

On the other hand, Wen Kexing showed no sign that he was in the disadvantage. When Zhou Zishu took a closer look, his martial arts approach was entirely different to his father, the "Divine" Wen Ruyu—no, even the legendary Wen Ruyu couldn't hold a candle to his son's level.

The few moves Wen Kexing taught Zhang Chengling back then was pulled from his father's method, and they gave a very neutral, balanced feel.

As of right now, Zhou Zishu saw that every single move from him showed an incredible level of ruthlessness, and he was unable to discern which sect he could be from with this kind of style; this to him was entirely uncharted territory. It looked similar to how Gu Xiang engaged in battle, but he seemed even more experienced than the girl. All in all, it wasn't what he inherited from his parents... Zhou Zishu narrowed his eyes, his theory slowly taking form.

At the same time, he didn't know how to feel about this: All the figures in the martial arts world that he couldn't identify were gathering here in front of him tonight.

Suddenly, he felt droplets of rainwater fell from the sky as the wind seemed to turn colder. After a few drops, a drizzle quietly arrived.

Zhou Zishu tightened his outer robes around himself, stretching his legs and swinging them. He raised his voice to talk to the currently fighting men, "Hey, Sir Ye, Brother Wen, it's raining right now and I feel very cold, so how about we call this off?"

His voice sounded like that of a circus audience, and not someone watching two martial arts masters go at it.

Ye Baiyi made a noise of contempt and retreated several feet. When he landed on the ground, he fixed his disheveled clothes, those ethereally fluttering sleeves torn by Wen Kexing. Zhou Zishu felt like this was Wen Kexing's bad habit; since his orientation was not something often discussed out loud, he couldn't help but imposing it onto everyone else.

Wen Kexing was struggling a little. He held his chest and took steps backwards, feeling like his organs were turned upside down. He coughed up blood, his ribs aching after the other man's attack; he had no idea if they were still intact or not.

Ye Baiyi stared at Wen Kexing silently. "You've gone past your limit. If we hadn't stop, I could have taken your life in the next ten moves."

Wen Kexing's shoulders curved forward as he stood there, glaring at Ye Baiyi coldly.

Zhou Zishu sighed. "Senior Ye, as our predecessor, why must death be the only treatment you have for us?" Please go back to your mountain and live your old man life, why dwell on your worries and run to Dong Ting to mess with others' business?

Unexpectedly, those words seemed to act as a reminder for Wen Kexing. With no fear in his bones, he spoke up, "You're past your prime. If you are still alive ten years later, I will be the one to take your life."

Ye Baiyi looked stunned, like he just heard the biggest joke in the world. He immediately laughed, his Buddha stone face shifted disturbingly. Zhou Zishu was worried that those stiff lines on his face might crack if he kept going.

Ye Baiyi replied, "Take my life? Good, good—no one has dared say that to me in the past fifty years, I'll surely be waiting for you."

He was about to leave, but seemed to remember something. He turned to look at Zhou Zishu contemplatively, and spoke after the silence, "I don't know of a way to treat your injuries."

Zhou Zishu's expression remained unchanged while amusement sparked inside him; Ye Baiyi sounded like he held him in high regards or something. He replied, "You are not all-knowing, sir, no one expects you to have a solution in the first place."

Ye Baiyi shook his head. "Your meridians have almost withered completely, like an ancient tree without roots. Even removing the poison inside you won't help; in fact, channeling more energy into you will break your dying meridians, and you can only perish."

Wen Kexing staggered in shock as he turned and gave Zhou Zishu a look of disbelief. The other man was still perching on the top of the wall, completely leisurely and uncaring; rain fell on him and left his hair soaking wet. He looked like a dim ray of light, and had Wen Kexing not witnessed what he did in the cave that one time, he would never have realized he was someone carrying injuries.

Zhou Zishu's laughed resounded in the air, "So my fate is sealed, then?"

Ye Baiyi nodded bluntly.

Looking at him, Zhou Zishu came to the realization that since Ye Baiyi had holed up in the mountain for too long, aside from his endless appetite he had lost all tactfulness. He sighed, "Sir, why must you indirectly mock me like that? I have never wronged you before, so please don't repeat that matter, it's not a nice thing to talk about."

Ye Baiyi stared at him silently before leaving without saying another word.

Zhou Zishu had a suspicion that the man called him out here for a different matter but he had forgotten it after the fight. He didn't remind him about it however, and jumped down from the wall.

Wen Kexing was still looking at him with an unreadable expression, so he called out. "Why are you still standing there? Are you injured or..."

He couldn't continue, as Wen Kexing suddenly came closer and held his face between his cold hands.

Water ran down Wen Kexing's face, and the world surrounding them was filled with the sound of rain. He was expressionless, wild hair sticking to his pale face, eyes dark. Those eyes reminded Zhou Zishu of the unconcerned look he received from Wen Kexing from the tavern the first time they met.

Wen Kexing started to talk. “When I was little, mother forced me to read and father forced me to learn how to fight. In our village, other children were allowed to play around and only I wasn’t, I had to stay inside to read and practice with my sword and could only go outside when the sky was dark. When I was excited to join others, those kids were already called home by their parents to have dinner.”

Zhou Zishu felt like the current position was a bit weird, so he tilted his head in an attempt to break out of the grip. But then he saw Wen Kexing’s dazed look; the rain clung to his eyelashes and as he blinked, it ran down his cheeks, giving the illusion that he was crying.

“I really hated my parents back then, so I always sulked. Father told me that if I waited until I grew up to practice my skills, it would be too late. I thought, if I waited until I grew up to be able to play like a child, it would be too late too.”

He paused, the word “late” held inside his mouth and repeated, as if he was tasting its bitterness carefully. Then he wound his arms around Zhou Zishu’s neck, hugging him like an aggrieved manchild.

Zhou Zishu sighed. Wen Kexing wasn’t the only one to have tasted the bitterness of that word.

Then Wen Kexing let go and asked, “Your injuries can’t be treated?”

Zhou Zishu shook his head and smiled self-mockingly.

Wen Kexing, after falling into silence, asked again. “How many... how many years do you have left?”

Zhou Zishu calculated. “Around two to three years.”

Wen Kexing suddenly burst out laughing. Zhou Zishu felt like something was amiss with his attitude, “Are you alright?”

Wen Kexing shook his head, retreating step by step. “Throughout my entire life, I can’t ever have fun when I want to; when I grew up a little, I wanted to study under my parents but they were no longer there. Say, do you think... I was born in the wrong time? How fortunate...”

He stopped smiling, turned away and left, leaving a confused Zhou Zishu behind.

How fortunate, that I haven’t truly fallen for you.

One only knew autumn when the cold rain came; parasol trees dying of old age; the suffering of the cold under a thin blanket; wasting your lifetimes away... all belated regrets in the end, regrets that we hadn’t met sooner.

Chapter 30 - Rainy Night

Gu Xiang opened an umbrella and held another one close to her chest while wading through the rain. Her embroidered shoes stepped on the stones underneath, causing the water to splash on her pant legs. A gust of cold wind caused her to shiver; she felt like no one could be more of a dedicated and loyal individual than her right now.

When the girl looked up, she saw a man walking alone in the rain with his head down.

Wen Kexing was soaked to the bone, messy clothes sticking to his body. He paid no mind to his slightly tumultuous state.

Gu Xiang caught up to him and called out, “Master!”

Wen Kexing didn’t turn to look back at her, but he evidently heard her voice as he stopped to wait. Gu Xiang ran up to him and gave him the other umbrella, internally feeling like suffering outdoors in this miserable weather was such a waste of her effort—seeing how her Master usually behaved, Gu Xiang was pretty sure that he had just been doing some indecent activities at some indecent places.

So she pursed her lips and asked somewhat disapprovingly. “Did you go fool around somewhere, Master?”

Wen Kexing opened the umbrella, taking a few steps before replying quietly, “Went fighting.”

Gu Xiang asked, out of instinct, “In the bedroom?”

As Wen Kexing turned to stare at her, she was smart enough to slapp herself lightly, her tone serious, “Stupid, stupid mouth, what kind of trash are you spouting? You can’t just say such things!”

“Ah-Xiang.” Wen Kexing cut in, not humoring her.

Gu Xiang blinked. It only rained harder, the water creating a thick fog-like layer that prevented her from seeing Wen Kexing’s expressions clearly. After the solemn silence, he looked down and said softly. “He said... He’d die soon.”

Gu Xiang made a questioning noise, unable to react to that, “Who’s going to die?”

“Zhou Xu.”

There was a pause from Wen Kexing that might be either for him to compose himself or for Gu Xiang to take it in. As he continued walking forward, he molded his voice into the usual nonchalance it possessed, “He suffers from internal injuries, but

from the way I see him go about, I assume that they are non-threatening. But today I learned that they were incurable, and he would only last two or three more years. The moment I heard that, I knew who he was... Hah! Had I known that from the beginning, I would have never followed him!”

Gu Xiang’s eyes were wide open as she seemed to have difficulty processing the truth. After a good while, she asked cautiously. “Zhou Xu?”

“Yeah.” Wen Kexing’s voice was low. “At first I thought he couldn’t be from Tian Chuang. There’s no escaping that place, and the ones who try will have to suffer the Nails of Seven Apertures for Three Autumns, resulting in the loss of their martial art skills and all senses; they will be turned into invalids who can keep secrets better than the dead. At first, I thought that there was no way he was carrying the Nails on him, seeing how capable he was... But just now someone let me know that he had a particular method to slow down the damage, but nonetheless he wouldn’t survive for more than three years.”

This was the first time Gu Xiang ever heard about this; she barely breathed while listening to him. At that, she asked, “Master... how do you know all this?”

“Me?” Wen Kexing let out a strange laugh, “Do you think I can survive until now if I don’t know more than I should?”

After a short silence, Gu Xiang continued. “Then... that Zhou Xu, he...”

“I met someone who escaped from Tian Chuang once.” A pause. “There has never been someone who can evade the fate of turning catatonic, but he can. From it I can guess that his rank was Great Butler at the very least; he... he might have been the former leader even.”

Gu Xiang was surprised. “If he was the leader, then why would he run...” Then she stopped, seemingly having realized something.

Wen Kexing was walking very quickly now, as if he wanted to leave something behind him as far as possible. With Gu Xiang’s short legs, she had to jog lightly to catch up to him. Seeing that he only got quicker and quicker, Gu Xiang disrupted the silence between them. “Master, are you heartbroken?”

Wen Kexing asked gently without looking back. “What would I be heartbroken about?”

After mulling it over, Gu Xiang had to admit that she wasn’t sure. She heard him laugh softly, his feet almost gliding over the ground rather than moving. “With his disguise, I can’t even know for sure if he’s a beauty or not... Besides, I prefer the soft type, so he won’t be of my taste even if he is beautiful.”

Even with her qinggong Gu Xiang was unable to catch up, and she blurted out, “But didn’t you say once that you liked the tall ones with tiny waist and pretty butterfly bones...”

“You remember it wrong,” he interrupted. Then he added, justifying to no one in particular. “I just felt like... I’d finally found someone I can relate to—Gu Xiang, stop following me.”

“Huh?” In a blink, Wen Kexing was already meters away from her. Gu Xiang called out sulkily, “Why, Master? Did I anger you again?”

Wen Kexing had already disappeared in the rain with only his distant voice reaching her ears. “You talk too much.”

Gu Xiang, left all alone, stomped petulantly and cursed him under her breath, “I was nice to you and this is what I get!”

Then she raised her head to stare after the direction Wen Kexing had vanished to, suddenly being reminded of the image of his soaked back, his broad shoulders, his unwavering steps under the rain that didn’t wait for her one bit. There was no one beside him but he never looked sideways, like he had been travelling alone for a while now.

She pitied him a little.

Finding someone you could connect with or whatever was fine... But that person was a flickering lamp that would die out in a few years, so what was the point?

Under the cold wind and rain, one thought they could have attained something but couldn’t. Who in this world could really live how they wanted to?

Could you?

No one knew where Wen Kexing went that night.

In the early morning, someone consistently banged hard on Zhou Zishu’s door. When he opened the door, Cao Weining almost crashed into him, but then the younger dragged him outside, telling him while running, “How can you be so calm in your room, your disciple is about to lose his life!”

“Who?” After that chaotic night, Zhou Zishu’s thoughts had yet to untangle themselves. It took him a few seconds to react, and he frowned. “You mean Zhang Chengling? What happened now, why is it always him?”

Cao Weining sighed. “Feels like this year is his unlucky year, I have no idea how he keeps getting into these kind of situations—yesterday someone tried to assassinate

him, but fortunately Sir Zhao next door was alerted and they managed to capture the person responsible. Unfortunately though, that man was on a suicide mission and he poisoned himself the moment he was caught. Say—”

Cao Weining paused, suspicions creeping in. He thought back to what his Senior Uncle Mo Huaikong told him earlier this morning: Among all of the big names that gathered here in Dong Ting, who was so determined to mess up the life of a kid who was not all that bright? Rather than to try to finish the job, it would be more likely that the motive was to cover up something.

Even with his simple minds, Cao Weining could sense that something was amiss. There was something wrong in the atmosphere—it was repressed by Gao Chong’s side for the time being, but doubts and theories spread like a plague.

What exactly was the Lapis Armor?

By the time Zhou Zishu arrived, Zhang Chengling and Zhao Jing’s rooms were already surrounded by a huge crowd. Zhao Jing was naked from the waist up, shoulders seemingly bleeding, currently sitting on a long bench with someone bandaging his wounds. He wore an unpleasant expression, a sword carried on his back with blood still on it.

There were two corpses on the ground, face all purple; it looked like they had been poisoned. Zhou Zishu saw a hook beside one body and instantly knew that it was from the Scorpions.

There were actually several factions amongst the Scorpions, depending on the hiring price. For instance, those who were with the Delighted Mourning Ghost and helped him lure out Zhang Chengling were not those who would lay down their lives; to acquire those, one would need to pay a higher price.

It was more troublesome with these lot. There’s no telling how many they were; once a group failed another group would advance, and they were all the fearless type. If they succeeded, they got paid handsomely; if they didn’t, they would have to leave their own body right there.

That’s why it was not at all cheap.

Who would spend this much to kill Zhang Chengling? Did they feel like the snott-nosed brat possessed some kind of intelligence that would create troubles in the future?

A strange idea popped up inside Zhou Zishu’s head. He thought, I’ve made plenty enemies back in my day, but not this excessive.

His gaze thrown at Zhang Chengling carried some indescribable feelings.

Zhou Zishu, however, didn't expect the young boy currently standing at a corner to be unsurprised and unafraid. He only lowered his head as if looking at the two bodies, showing the top of his head. Silence fell over him completely; whenever people asked him something he would only nod or shake his head.

Gao Chong bent down a little and asked Zhang Chengling with a kind face. "Chengling, do you know these people?"

Zhang Chengling glanced at him, then shook his lowered head.

Gao Chong, in turns, spoke even more gently, hand reaching out to pat his head. "Don't be afraid, my child, we will avenge you. Tell me, what did these two vile individuals say to you last night?"

Zhang Chengling didn't look him in the eye and shook his head again. Gao Chong was starting to become perplexed when someone cut in enigmatically, "What good would come out of asking that question, Sir Gao? We elders all know that these two are Scorpion martyrs; they are merely blades and blades don't talk, do they? What a joke! You should ask the boy if he knows something we don't instead."

That was Feng Xiaofeng, currently standing on the ground instead of perching on Gao Shannu's shoulder. Because of his height, he had to crane his neck with his nose facing the sky; completed with his mocking tone, he made it hard for people to not want to beat him up.

Gao Shannu stood behind him quietly. With his scary face, he was like a demon in folk tales.

Gao Chong frowned at that. Zhao Jing, on the other hand, discarded all manners as he stood up, pointed at Feng Xiaofeng and shouted, "You despicable dwarf, how can your conscience let you say those words?"

Feng Xiaofeng scoffed, "Sir Zhao, why is it that ever since you took in the Zhang orphan, you didn't let him leave your side for one second? You and I know the reason all too well, don't think I'm an idiot!"

With shining eyes, he looked at Zhang Chengling, his voice sharp as knife, "Tell us the truth, boy, do you know where your family's Lapis Armor piece went? Is it still with you? Or is it stolen by this Zhao— no, Sir Zhao?"

Zhao Jing was enraged. "You dwarf, curse your family all to Hell!"

Gao Shannu suddenly looked up to pin Zhao Jing down with his stare. Feng Xiaofeng stopped him with a wave of an arm, and Gao Shannu obediently stepped

back to his place behind him. Feng Xiaofeng continued. “Did I hit a nerve, Sir Zhao? Don’t be so discourteous.”

Zhao Jing wanted nothing more than to charge forward and teach him a lesson.

Gao Chong quickly stepped in, his voice serious, “Brother Feng, unfounded accusations should not be thrown around to disturb our solidarity—someone come take these bodies away first, then we will discuss something long-term...”

But then someone spoke up, “Sir Gao, why are you being so secretive? Shouldn’t you ask the boy now that everyone is present? This is for his own good at the end of the day.”

Zhang Chengling looked up at that, his face pale, eyes unfocused. He felt like everyone was staring at him, gossiping about him, forcing him to give them an explanation, but he truly knew nothing.

Zhou Zishu, who was used to blending in with the crowd without anyone noticing, felt a surge of anger when he saw Zhang Chengling’s empty expressions.

He wanted to push at everyone, then dragged the young boy far away from all this filth. But that was not something Zhou Zishu would do, wasn’t it? To think carefully before he acted, to keep himself hidden away from the scene: These had always been his principles.

Back then, even His Majesty would praise him for being increasingly calculating and cautious as the years went on... but old man Ye Baiyi had told him that he would show his tail eventually.

Chapter 31 - Escape

Zhou Zishu suddenly felt a gaze on him, as if someone was staring at him specifically. Turning his head around, he met Ye Baiyi's eyes. Ye Baiyi was also standing in the crowd, not too far from him, but not too close either; he didn't gesture, not even greeting him with a single nod, still staring at him without blinking at all. His expression was calm, like it had been when he had told Zhou Zishu "You're going to die soon."

You're going to die soon, you've been a tortoise that only knows how to shrink its head in the face of danger -- Zhou Zishu murmured it to himself quietly in his heart, thinking, what's the big deal about this? At this stage, what did he have to worry about paving the road ahead for future plans, or about plotting? If a person had never acted rashly at least once in his life, wasn't he then too repressed, too pitiable?

He suddenly discovered that his own dream was, all along, to be a bastard⁸⁹ who stuck his neck out and didn't hide under his shell. The endlessly-clamouring crowd suddenly heard a light laugh; that laugh of his should not have stood out among the raucous crowd, but by some unknown method, it suppressed all the other voices just like that. Then a thin, unassuming man with a sickly yellow face walked out, and said in a soft voice, "Everyone, what kind of logic is it, to trouble a child so much in public?"

Zhang Chengling's eyes brightened. His mouth moved soundlessly, forming the words, "Shifu."

Cao Weining had spoke highly of Zhou Zishu to Gao Chong, so Gao Chong hesitated for a bit, before calling out his identity, "Brother Zhou."

Gao Chong only found it strange that the man at this moment possessed the aura unique to an expert, and thus should have been unforgettable to himself. Yet, somehow, when Cao Weining had brought them to the Gao Family Manor that day, he surprisingly had not taken note of his person. Even at this moment, he could only recall with great difficulty that his surname was Zhou, and not his name. A chill twinged in Gao Chong's heart.

Zhou Zishu waved at Zhang Chengling, and said, "Come here, tyke."

Zhang Chengling threw himself into his embrace without a word, even more intimate with him than his own biological father.

Feng Xiaofeng screeched, "What are you to him?" Zhou Zishu hugged Zhang Chengling's shoulders, and tilted his head to take an eyeful of Feng Xiaofeng.

⁸⁹ 王八 refers to the softshell tortoise, but is also more commonly used as an insult

Looking at his appearance, he felt very peeved, and so challenged him with a languid air, “Do you not even recognise me, shortie?”

Feng Xiaofeng flew into a rage. This time, without even waiting for him to speak, the Gaoshan slave gave a low roar and charged towards Zhou Zishu. His physique was gigantic; for each step he took, it was as if he troubled the earth to quake thrice with it. Surging towards him like a tsunami, he had a meteor hammer almost as large as a person’s head in his hand, intending to pulverise Zhou Zishu into mush.

It was as if he treated every person who dared to insult Feng Xiaofeng as an enemy who had slain his father. The relationship between these two was truly odd.

However, in a flash, Zhou Zishu was already no longer where he had been standing, bringing Zhang Chengling with him along the way. The meteor hammer slammed into the floor, making a crater in the stone slates.

Gao Chong watched with a clinical eye off to the side, and felt that this person’s qinggong seemed to have reached a level unsurpassed by any, to be able to reach this sort of speed even while lugging a person around.

Having missed, the Gaoshan slave swept his hammer out horizontally once more in a woosh. Zhou Zishu timed his chance well, tapping the tip of his shoe, once, lightly on the chain, and rose another two feet, then made use of the hammer coming in his direction and added a kick to its head. No one knew how much force was in that kick, but regardless, when they had all finally registered it happening, that meteor hammer had already swung one round, and was heading straight for its master.

The Gaoshan slave’s physique was not nimble, rendering him unable to avoid the hammer; under duress, he could only hug himself tight, retract his head, and turn himself sideways with difficulty. With a loud bellow, he absorbed the blow with his shoulder, his entire person sent flying by his hammer, crashing to the floor.

Feng Xiaofeng shrieked, as if that meteor hammer had struck him personally. In the moment, he no longer cared about the others, flinging himself forward to check on his Gaoshan slave first. The Gaoshan slave’s shoulder had been shattered on one side, but since he was, after all, sturdier than others, he was still alive and conscious. He curled into an enormous ball on the floor, soundless, a pair of eyes gazing at Feng Xiaofeng in pain.

Feng Xiaofeng raised his head only then, glaring at Zhou Zishu hatefully.

Zhou Zishu’s face was as placid as still water as he said, “He wanted my life, yet, I didn’t want his.” The he pulled Zhang Chengling to his feet, saying, “Let’s go.”

“Hold it!” This time, it was Huashan Sect Leader Yu Qiufeng. Once he stood, the few major sects that backed Huashan stood up with him; Yu Qiufeng looked at Zhou

Zishu with an extremely unfriendly expression, and then clasped his fist haphazardly at him, grinding out between his teeth, “This wanderer, aren’t you belittling everyone here by bringing this child away just like that, right in front of the faces of all the heroes under this sky?”

Zhou Zishu glanced at him, and said coolly, “So, what should I do, according to Sect Leader Yu?”

Yu Qiufeng said, “You can leave if you want, but first, let him explain why people keep hunting him down, whether the Zhang family has anything to do with the Lapis Armour, and in whose hands the Lapis Armour is at present?!”

Zhou Zishu looked at this embittered Huashan Sect Leader with a superficial smile, lowered his head, and asked Zhang Chengling, “Do you know what he’s saying?”

Zhang Chengling tightened his lips, and shook his head.

Zhou Zishu asked, “Do you want to speak about the things he asked you?”

Zhang Chengling extended his arm, and carefully pulled at his robes, wordless. Zhou Zishu nodded, and turned back to Yu Qiufeng to say, “Sect Leader Yu, you have questions, but he too can decline to answer. It’s better if we just bid each other farewell here, and never cross each other’s paths in the future.”

Done speaking, he tugged Zhang Chengling up and made to leave. Behind Yu Qiufeng, the Cangshan Sect Leader Huang Daoren chuckled coldly, “This lad is too arrogant!” And took the lead in causing him difficulty. This Huang Daoren had unassuming features, with a dark face that was very oddly-shaped, yet he loved to carry that folding fan all year round, always lurking behind Yu Qiufeng pretending to be one of culture. Whoever knew what he was thinking.

Yet he didn’t conceal his hand, as he struck at this moment like a giant potato flung towards them.

Zhou Zishu scoffed internally. It was technically correct to say that he was arrogant; anyway, these present only knew how to cluck and titter like mother hens, and he did not respect a single one of them. As Huang Daoren’s first blow arrived, Zhou Zishu did not even let go of Zhang Chengling’s hand. In a flash, the two men had already exchanged innumerable blows, a blur to the crowd, then Huang Daoren gave a low sound of pain, and retreated three steps. Blood burst forth from his mouth as he fell on his ass.

And became a shrivelled potato.

The scene was instantly filled with shocked cries of "Sect Leader!"

Yu Qiufeng panicked, pointed to Zhou Zishu and said, "Where has this unorthodoxy come from; unless, he belongs to the Ghosts? Don't let him leave!"

He couldn't win, and so pinned falsehoods to him. The corner of Zhou Zishu's mouth twitched. He had no intention of quarrelling with them, so he hugged Zhang Chengling, and was countless zhang away in the blink of an eye. The scene was in chaos; Cao Weining was stammering his defenses of Zhou Zishu, others like Gao Chong and Zhao Jing remaining silent with unknown intentions, and there was a bunch of idiots led by Yu Qiufeng encouraged to quarrel without knowing the true reason why they were doing so.

They were shouting and hollering, like a marketplace of animals.

Zhou Zishu maneuvered through the crowd like a ghost, occasionally striking out to fend off a few that bumped into him. Because of the Lapis Armour, Zhang Chengling, in his arms, had become no more than a piece of meat that everyone wanted to take a bite out of; Yu Qiufeng seemed to morph into a mad dog all of a sudden, hot on his heels. Zhou Zishu only felt that this Huashan Sect Leader was like an old hag, unwilling to let it go!

The flames of annoyance raged in his heart. He stopped, whirled around, intending to meet him face on.

At this moment, a whip-like shadow suddenly broke through the air, coincidentally blocking Yu Qiufeng's path. Thereafter, he was met with the smell of alcohol. Zhou Zishu focused his eyes. That disheveled man covered in the smell of alcohol, was in fact Wen Kexing, who had left even without saying a word of goodbye last night.

Wen Kexing's eyes were completely bloodshot, his steps clumsy with the sloppiness unique to drunkards. He smiled lecherously at Zhou Zishu, intending to posture himself charismatically, alluringly, but it was ruined by a drunken belch--he said, "A-Xu, leave...leave first, I'll help you stop...stop them."

Before he even finished his sentence, he lurched a step, exactly like a roly-poly toy in the wind, head tilting and tail wobbling, causing the onlooker to worry. Then he dodged all of the blows Yu Qiufeng struck at him.

Amidst his wobbling, the whip in his hand cracked lawlessly; somehow, it "just happened" to loop around Yu Qiufeng's calf, and under the gaze of all, tripped the Huashan Sect Leader head-over-heels.

Wen Kexing even rubbed his eyes vigorously, stepping the dance steps of the Yang folk dance with his noodle-like legs as he tilted his head to watch the furiously embarrassed Yu Qiufeng. His hand waved in front of his eyes, and he said, tongue

heavy in his mouth, "Hey, you, the one with...two, two heads, did...did you drink too much as well? What are you crawling on the ground for?"

Witnessing this, Zhou Zishu shook his head internally, feeling that the Huashan Sect would bear a profound hatred towards Wen Kexing this time.

To show his appreciation for Wen Kexing's offer, he took the chance to sneak off with Zhang Chengling without delay, and stole two horses from somewhere. He threw Zhang Chengling onto the horse's back, and took him far away, the dust settling behind them.

Zhang Chengling's riding was bad--he was bad at all aspects of it. They had not set out for long before he could hardly catch up with Zhou Zishu, swaying to and fro on the horse's back.

Zhou Zishu sighed internally. He knew that Zhang Chengling was a block of wood, and so did not expect from him the qualities of a wooden support beam, abandoning the horse after they had covered some distance. He took Zhang Chengling, and leapt over the wall into a long-abandoned, rundown courtyard, letting this youth who had been terrified for the whole day rest for a bit.

A short while later, the front door of this abandoned yard was suddenly pushed open by someone outside. Zhang Chengling jumped up in paranoia, only to see Wen Kexing stumble in, shaky on his feet.

At first, Zhang Chengling thought he was only acting drunk, but upon a second look now, he discovered that he was so drunk that he could not tell the four cardinal directions from one another. He stumbled a few steps like a headless fly zipping around, sinking onto one knee in front of Zhou Zishu. His body pitched forward, and he fell to the floor.

Zhou Zishu hastily pulled his face up for a look, and saw that Wen Kexing's face was flushed red, devoid of any injuries. But Wen Kexing still knew to direct a dazed laugh at him, hugging Zhou Zishu's legs tightly. Rolling to the side, he lay on the floor, using those two legs as either his pillow or his blanket.

Zhou Zishu couldn't help but ask, "Did you fall into a wine jar?"

Wen Kexing said, tongue heavy in his mouth, "Yesterday I, found a wine, wine cellar...mn, I spent a night in there, drank more than ten jars...how satisfying, how satisfying!"

He had really drunk too much. Once he started laughing, he couldn't stop, clinging tightly onto Zhou Zishu's leg, burying his face into it, still murmuring 'how satisfying'."

At a loss for words, Zhou Zishu watched his head loll to one side and start to snore, fast asleep while the sun was still up, and therefore concluded that this person was really spending his energy on frivolous things.

Chapter 32 - Rong Xuan

While the three of them just sauntered away without a care, the Gao Family at the moment was in utter chaos. Cao Weining was still fuming that this affair was obviously due to Huashan Sect's unscrupulous behaviour; to stop him from idle talk, he simply commanded him, "Shut up."

Cao Weining turned his head to look at his shishu, and was just thinking of saying, Shishu, how can you lower your head in the face of evil? when Mo Huaikong pointed at Yu Qiufeng and said, "Don't you see him wailing about killing himself? Shut up, it's got absolutely nothing to do with you, watch closely!"

Cao Weining shut his mouth accordingly.

He looked around for a moment, then lowered his voice to ask Mo Huaikong, "Shishu, say, why did Hero Zhao and Hero Gao let Zhou-xiong take the Zhangs' kid away so easily?"

Mo Huaikong was glaring in the forward direction like a hawk; at this, he coldly swept his gaze at Cao Weining, and squeezed a sentence from between his teeth, saying, "Has your brain been eaten by a dog?"

Cao Weining had long grown a thick skin from his scolding, and didn't flush one bit, still waiting extremely sincerely for his shishu to demystify the situation. But Mo Huaikong turned his head away, and ignored him again; Cao Weining only understood a beat later, discovering that his brain was really eaten by a dog that he couldn't even tell--obviously, not even his shishu knew why!

Reverend Cimu hurried over, with a middle-aged man following behind him. This man was skinny in build, and was dressed in black ceremonial robes. The corner of his mouth was downturned, and he had two deep nasolabial folds. His sword-sharp eyebrows extended into his sideburns, and his eyes were extremely bright; one look, and one could tell that he was one not to be crossed. Upon seeing this chaotic scene, Reverend Cimu had to resort to the Shaolin Lion's Roar. Many of the low-levelled martial artists had spots swimming in front of their eyes from the single bellow, and the crowd only settled then.

Gao Chong and Zhao Jing caught sight of the man behind Reverend Cimu and stood instead, with Zhao Jing exposing this man's identity first, calling, "Shen-shixiong!"⁹⁰

Upon hearing Mo Huaikong make a questioning sound, Cao Weining hastily took his chance to ask, "Shishu, who is this?"

⁹⁰ "shi" here refers to having "worldly ties" aka their families have had longstanding relationships

Mo Huaikong frowned, and said, "This is the head of the Shen family in Shuzhong, Shen Zhen, usually he's like a maiden, never leaving his house at all, staying indoors to maintain his pale face. He's only ever scared of the sun tanning his skin, why is he willing to risk his tender skin to brave the sun in Dongting so far away from home today? It's truly a miracle."

Cao Weining had never heard of this person, and said, "Ah" dumbly. Mo Huaikong could not tolerate his dull manner, and glared at him, ultimately explaining, "Most of you youngsters wouldn't know, the five major clans with the greatest reputations in the jianghu were the Zhangs of Jiangnan, the Zhaos of Taihu, the Gaos of Dongting, the Shens of Shuzhong, and the Lus of Taixing. Though, today, apart from Gao Chong and Zhao Jing, all that's left of the Zhang family is one person, the Shen clan has already retired from the jianghu and washed its hands of all matters, and there's no one left of the Lus. The five major clans have long lost their might, and most of the younger generation no longer remember them."

Cao Weining counted off with his fingers, and asked, "That's not right, shishu, including the descendant of the Zhang family, only four surnames have come, how are there five clans?"

Mo Huaikong said, irritated, "That's because the head of the Lu clan died of illness ten years ago, and he didn't accumulate good karma in his previous life, so he didn't leave behind any children and the bloodline died with him. He had some ties with the Taishan Sect Leader who turned into a Ghost, Hua Fangling, and so left his properties and a few disciples with the Taishan Sect. Since Hua Qingsong is here, doesn't he count as the Lu clan? Why do you not know jackshit, how do you have so many questions? Don't tell others that I'm your shishu, and embarrass me!"

Shen Zhen murmured something to Reverend Cimu. Reverend Cimu sighed and murmured a Buddhist mantra, nodding. Soon after, he stood and received a box presented by a Shen disciple, opening it. Inside it was a silk pouch; Shen Zhen opened the pouch, and there was the sound of someone drawing an intake of breath, shouting, "It's the Lapis Armour!"

Cao Weining also stretched his neck out to look. When that object was completely revealed, it was an extremely exquisite glass fragment no bigger than a palm, glinting weakly under the sunlight. Had it not been announced, who would have guessed that it was such a small plaything that had whipped up a frenzy of blood and gore?

The knot of Yu Qiufeng's throat bobbed as he cleared his throat, mumbling, "Is this really one of the five pieces of the Lapis Armour?"

Shen Zhen said, "Absolutely," and turned his gaze to Gao Chong.

Gao Chong's expression was inscrutable. After half a beat of silence, he finally instructed Deng Kuan, standing to his side, "There is a secret compartment on the

cupboard to the left of the door in my study, behind the copy of the Book of Rites on the third shelf. Open it, and bring whatever's inside to me."

Deng Kuan did not understand why, but went as ordered, returning in a short while with a small box in his hands as well. Gao Chong took the box, sighed, and opened it in front of the crowd, putting it side-by-side with Shen Zhen's small box. And just like this, two pieces of the legendary Lapis Armour were displayed in front of everyone.

Gao Chong said, "Since matters have come to this, this old man owes everyone an explanation. It is indeed true that there are five pieces to the Lapis Armour; all these years, each of us five have actually held on to one. A few years ago, Lu-xiong died before his time, and entrusted his piece to the Hero Hua, the Taishan Sect Leader, but he never thought that...it would draw fatal trouble to him."

Reverend Cimu continued, "Amitabha, this old monk too knows some of what had transpired."

All gazes turned to this kind-looking, white-whiskered Shaolin monk, only to hear him say, "I'm not sure who here remembers that disaster that happened to the pugilist world thirty years ago."

Once he said this, the expressions of some of the older people present changed instantly. Even Ye Baiyi, a bystander enjoying the show, lifted his head slightly.

At this point, Zhou Zishu was regaling old stories of the Zhang family to a totally clueless Zhang Chengling from memory. Off to the side, Wen Kexing slept on, ignorant. Despite Zhou Zishu kicking him away, he was still gripping onto his sleeve tightly, lying sprawled out in an indecorous manner.

When Cao Weining had dragged Zhou Zishu out this morning, Zhou Zishu had been just about to eat; unable to do so, he could only wrap it up and keep it for later. Now, he took it out and gave it to Zhang Chengling, watching this youth scarf it down quickly.

"About things that happened thirty years ago, I only know of them approximately. Your father was probably still young then, when a martial arts genius named Rong Xuan appeared on the jianghu. With his long sword, he was nearly unparalleled in the world, and he loved to travel to make friends with the heroes all over; supposedly, he was very close with the younger generation of the five major clans back then. Now, the five major clans never speak of him, but as the descendant of the Zhang family, you should know about this too, right?"

Zhang Chengling nodded. There was a smidge of cake on the corner of his mouth. He said, "But my father never mentioned him."

"Not only did your father not mention him, but for these thirty years, his name has also been taboo to utter." Zhou Zishu sighed, and continued, "Afterwards, Rong Xuan married a wife. According to hearsay, his wife was also an outstanding lady, extremely beautiful, and was by birth of the Healers' Valley..."

At this point, he paused suddenly, and lowered his head to look at Wen Kexing off to the side, thinking, Also born of the Healers' Valley, unless this too is a coincidence?

He raised his head, and Zhang Chengling was staring at him unblinking, waiting for him to continue. Zhou Zishu had some suspicions, but didn't reveal them in front of him, and continued, "The two of them were deeply in love, and were a heavenly match, but who knew, one day, someone had caused the death of Rong Xuan's wife."

Zhang Chengling was shocked, and asked a stupid question, "Why?"

Zhou Zishu laughed. To kill someone, did anyone need a reason?

Still, he thought about it, and explained, "Let's say that most of it was...“an innocent person convicted for his stash of jade”. I haven't witnessed Rong Xuan's sword techniques, only heard that it truly lives up to being unprecedented and impossible to imitate. Before he even turned thirty, he started a sect and invented the legendary “Fengshan Sword”. The inability to see the Fengshan Sword Technique that split mountains and divided the sea back then in action is also one of life's greatest regrets. That Fengshan Sword of his is divided into two parts. The upper scroll is the mantra behind it,⁹¹ the lower scroll the sword technique; the lower scroll was his own invention, while rumour has it that he penned the upper scroll after chancing upon a secret ancient manual. You do know that...the words “peerless master” alone can drive people to madness.”

Zhang Chengling asked, “What happened afterwards?”

“Afterwards, Rong Xuan sunk into deep grief and experienced qi deviation. His behaviour transformed, and he started killing innocents. Without any other choice, the five major clans back then worked together, even invoking the Realm's Command to hunt him down together--to think about it, from that last time the Realm's Command made an appearance to date, it's been about thirty years. Afterwards, Rong Xuan fled into the bamboo ridge on Fengya Mountain, and had a fierce battle with those hunting him down who were led by five major clans. No one knows how many died in that battle, and according to hearsay, you still can hear the dead wailing till this day. Who could have thought that the best of friends could turn their weapons on one another, and give one another continuous hell?”

⁹¹ Translates to "heart's technique": Sort of like the path the student has to possess an understanding of to practice the sword technique. Usually inseparable from sword technique for wuxia manuals

Could it be, that all the bonds in this world were this impermanent?

He paused for a while, and nodded his head. “Indeed, the bamboo grove on Fengya Mountain is the Ghost Valley. Until today, no one knows why the Ghosts back then had stood with Rong Xuan. That battle was fought over countless days and nights, until Rong Xuan committed suicide in the end. The number of heroes under this sky was halved, and the five major clans never recovered. It was because of this battle, where both parties suffered heavy losses, that the rule that once one enters the Ghost Valley, they can never leave was set, earning us thirty years of peace.”

Here, Zhou Zishu frowned. He had gotten to know of this story through hearsay, and did not embellish it with his own guesses. Narrating it like this, there were actually many parts he did not understand, such as what had truly happened at Fengya Mountain back then, or how Rong Xuan’s wife had died. How did such a genius, who should have rightfully become a grandmaster of his era, end up in the Ghost Valley, and fall in with those people? Thankfully, Zhang Chengling was not a smart child, and only listened, befuddled, without understanding much.

The happenings within this affair were buried by the passage of time. How much of it was scandal-free enough to be exposed?

Those who were participants were either dead, or dared not to speak of it; not even Tian Chuang had unravelled the truth. Zhou Zishu suspected that...the Lapis Armour was a relic of the battle at Fengya Mountain all those years ago.

In the evening, Zhou Zishu finally pried off the hand of Wen Kexing’s that had a death grip on his clothes, and hunted some game to roast for dinner. He mused that he could go anywhere without issue, but bringing this little tyke with him would be a burden.

Yet he didn’t want to force him either, but would rather let Zhang Chengling decide his own path.

Wen Kexing was quite heavily drunk; even as night fell, he was still lying there like a pile of mud, unable to get up. Zhou Zishu taught Zhang Chengling a few more lines of the rhyme, told him to understand it by himself, then leant against the wall to the side, closing his eyes to recuperate. He didn’t know how long had passed before he dozed off, but he suddenly felt a hand find its way onto him, craftily unbuttoning his top.

Zhou Zishu grabbed the person's wrist and opened his eyes.

The Wen Kexing of this moment had not the slightest bit of drunkenness; seeing that he had been caught, he didn’t panic, only smiled at him in the dark, and still said, reasonably, “I just wanted to see what the legendary Three-Autumn Nails of the Seven

Acupuncture looked like, I wasn't about to do anything to you, neither was I going to make any moves on you."

The adage "The provision of an explanation is always an attempt to cover up the truth, and covering up is always the beginning of a mistake" was embodied in this slimy man with the surname Wen.

With one of his wrists caught by Zhou Zishu, his other hand braced on the ground, he was almost half lying on Zhou Zishu. Zhang Chengling was already sleeping like the dead; their breaths and words were as quiet as they could make them, and in the darkness, there was a suggestiveness to them that could not be defined.

Wen Kexing suddenly drew close, took off his outer robe, and wrapped it around Zhou Zishu. He played with a lock of hair at the side of Zhou Zishu's head, and asked in a low voice, "A-Xu, is 'Zhou Xu' your real name?"

Zhou Zishu threw his hand off and shoved him away, and said, confident with justification, "What joke is Wen-xiong cracking? Like 'Wen Kexing' is your real name."

Hearing this, Wen Kexing raised his eyebrows, and asked him in reply with an even softer voice, "So, according to you, what should my name be?"

Zhou Zishu was silent for a while, before he asked in a murmur, "Wen-xiong, is your surname truly Wen? I feel that, your surname should be Rong instead."

Chapter 33 - The Master of the Ghosts

Slowly, Wen Kexing righted himself into a sitting position, looking at him without saying a word. Crossing his legs, fingers tapping against his own knee, he only said in a quiet voice, after half a beat, "My surname isn't Rong. I'm only bitter that I've never met that one surnamed Rong in my life, otherwise, I'll slaughter him once for every one time I run into him."

Zhou Zishu's face was devoid of any surprise. Upon hearing this, he paused, before his speech slowed as he said, "Oh? Looks like I've guessed wrongly, then, I thought that...I thought that the current Master of the Ghost Valley is a Rong family descendant."

In the darkness, only Zhang Chengling's light snoring could be heard. The distance between the two of them was not far, but was as silent as a graveyard. After a while, a smile slowly formed on Wen Kexing's face. This smile was different from his usual dumb, squinty-eyed grin; there were no laugh wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, his pitch-black irises still as cold as ice, reflecting a weak light. He looked over sharply, slender eyebrow cocked slightly, giving off the impression of a false smile. "Oh?"

Zhou Zishu's voice was so quiet that it seemed like his lips did not move at all, but the speed at which he spoke was rapid. "The Delighted Mourning Ghost spent money to hire the Poisonous Scorpion to stalk the kid all throughout his journey, not because he wanted to kill him, but because he desperately wanted to know if he'd seen a man with a missing finger when the Zhang family tragedy had occurred. According to what I know, the Hanged Ghost Xue Fang is missing a finger. But ever since we met those people in the run-down temple that day, I knew that the extermination of the Zhang family was not carried out by someone of the Ghost Valley."

Like he was greatly interested, Wen Kexing continued asking, "How did you know this?"

Zhou Zishu laughed lightly. "Escorting that kid to Taihu unharmed, with all his limbs intact out of the snare of a hundred thousand Ghosts--if my abilities were really that great, I'd have ruled over the pugilist world years ago, what would I be here for?"

Wen Kexing looked at him with a burning gaze, and said, "...You don't have to be this humble, either."

Zhou Zishu continued, "But why would the Delighted Mourning Ghost chase after this kid so doggedly? I think that there might be only one explanation: no matter who committed the deed on the Zhang family, there must have been a Ghost from the bamboo ridge who left the Valley on his own and got himself involved in this, and the Delighted Mourning Ghost suspects that...or should I say, wants to let people suspect that, this person is the Hanged Ghost. Additionally, the man in black who Gu Xiang

killed in the rundown temple the other day, said the word “Purple” right before he died. Purple what? Let me guess...it can't be Purple Danger,⁹² can it?”

Wen Kexing nodded. “Indeed, the two of us followed them from Jiangnan all the way to Taihu, and then to Dongting. We arrived coincidentally, and our appearance was suspicious. I even killed that little ghost in the underground cave, because I was wary of him exposing my identity, am I right?”

Zhou Zishu said, “This isn't difficult to guess, Wen-xiong. If you take a look at the entire jianghu, there are too few people who I can't guess the background of. Discounting those of the Southern border and the Northern desert, within the pugilist world of the Central Plains, I can count them on one hand. You and I have spent so many days together, if I still couldn't tell, wouldn't I be too stupid?”

Wen Kexing was silent for a while, neither confirming nor denying. Then a laugh escaped him, and he nodded. “You really know too many things....Manor Lord Zhou? Lord Zhou?”

Zhou Zishu smiled. “I'm no more than a civilian now, the Valley Master is too polite.” When Wen Kexing had directly named the ‘Three-Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupuncture’ earlier, Zhou Zishu had known that Wen Kexing had already guessed at his own background.

The two of them said nothing else; in that moment, Wen Kexing was no longer the glib-tongued Casanova who had an exclusive taste for men, and Zhou Zishu was no longer the broke, homeless wanderer who sang little tunes off-pitch--the mysterious master of Fengya Mountain and the unpredictable former leader of Tian Chuang faced each other silently in an abandoned house, but it was more like a soundless sizing-up of the other.

The only witness was, unbelievably, sleeping like the dead off to one side.

Zhou Zishu glanced in the direction of Zhang Chengling, and lowered his voice even further. “Isn't the Ghost Master following this child because you think he knows something? Such as...who the person who broke the rule and left the Valley, and kept hunting him down after is?”

Wen Kexing asked in reply, all smiles, “How do you know that the one I'm following is him?”

Zhou Zishu let loose a laugh. “If you're not following him, you can't be following me, can you?”

⁹² This refers to Gu Xiang

Yet, Wen Kexing only smiled. His demeanour could have been easily mistaken for one deeply in love as they gazed at their lover, his smile giving Zhou Zishu goosebumps. Half a beat later, Wen Kexing asked, light, "A-Xu, don't you think we're becoming a better match for each other?"

Zhou Zishu said resolutely, "Not at all."

Wen Kexing gazed at him, his expression still one of hair-raising gentleness. They looked at each other for half a beat, before Zhou Zishu suddenly asked, "Are you crazy, or is this an aftereffect of a qi deviation?"

But Wen Kexing caught his fingers lightly and caressed his palm. He lifted it, bent his head to press a gentle kiss to the back of his hand, and asked, "What do you think?"

Goosebumps instantly rose all over on Zhou Zishu's body. He snatched his hand back. That warm sensation of his lips and that persistent gaze seemed to entangle into something inseparable; Zhou Zishu was starting to find that Wen Kexing was demented, and not lightly so. "Wen-xiong's appetite is too good."

Wen Kexing said shamelessly, "Nicely put, except that my appetite is whetted once I lay eyes on you, what do you suggest I do?"

Immediately afterwards, before Zhou Zishu could say anything, Wen Kexing continued bullshitting endlessly, "Many years ago, I saw a corpse by the roadside which hair had already withered, the mess clumped into a ball. The colours of its clothes had faded until I can no longer tell what they once had been. It had a face that was gory with blood and flesh, its nose sliced off, its features indistinguishable. A spear had pierced it, from the chest in front all through to its back, coming out from under the shoulder blades. I glanced at it a few more times--one look at those shoulder blades, and I knew that this had to be an unparalleled beauty when they had been alive, and guess what?"

Zhou Zihu inhaled deeply, but Wen Kexing interjected before he could speak, "I have yet to misjudge a person's beauty, having told a person's beauty by their bones my whole life. So, A-Xu, you might as well wash off the disguise on your face, and let me kiss and hug you until my addiction is sated. Beautiful people are rare in this world, but they're also not too difficult to come across. I've embraced almost all of the beauties in this world, and have never pestered them afterwards. Who knows, perhaps after I've seen your true face, we develop passionate, torrid emotions for each other, have a one-night stand, and I won't think of you afterwards again. But the way you are now...makes me want to live out the rest of my life with you instead."

Zhou Zishu had wanted to say something, his words already on the tip of his tongue, but instantly forgot them once he heard this. He stared at Wen Kexing, eyes wide and tongue-tied.

Then Wen Kexing cackled, rocking back and forth in his laughter, and pointed at Zhou Zishu as he said, "Scared you to death, didn't I."

"Fuck you," Zhou Zishu evaluated simply, then paused. As though he had thought of something, he suddenly patted his shoulder, and said, "Forget it, my condolences."

Wen Kexing froze, and asked hesitantly, "What?"

But Zhou Zishu said nothing else, only leant against the wall, and closed his eyes to rest.

Why would someone remember a dead person's appearance so clearly that they could still relate what they had been wearing and how their hair had been in such extensive detail, even after so many years had passed? He must have had gone over it countless times until it had been carved into his heart, narrate it in a joking manner as if it was nothing to him, over and over again, only fearing that he would forget how the deceased had looked like.

Inexplicably, Zhou Zishu understood that feeling--they might have met in the ocean of strangers out of coincidence, ignorant of each other's background, but this did not stand in the way of them being kindred souls.

The next day, Zhou Zishu left the abandoned courtyard with Zhang Chengling--of course, bringing an uninvited shadow with the surname of Wen along with them. Zhou Zishu was planning to pay another visit to the Pingan Bank to check in on the progress of what he'd asked them to investigate the last time, so that he could gain a better understanding on things. It afforded him to stuff information into Zhang Chengling's empty head, so that he didn't just dumbly practice gongfu and do nothing else.

Zhang Chengling discovered very quickly that learning from this cheap shifu of his was extremely painful: he only cared about reciting a whole bunch of tongue-twisting and complex mantras, uncaring of whether others could understand him or memorise them, and treated that as imparting knowledge to Zhang Chengling. To give this practice a better-sounding name, it was "a shifu's responsibility to accept disciples, and a person's own responsibility to cultivate knowledge."

Zhang Chengling felt that Zhou-shifu's expectations were too high, higher than the halfway point up a mountain; amid the fog and clouds, his head was even more muddled, his eyes rolling back in his head as he falteringly recited the mantras. Zhou Zishu was very annoyed by his dumb look, and swatted him on the back of his head, scolding, "Are you reciting formulas, or hanging yourself?"

Zhang Chengling knew he was stupid; not daring to talk back, he gazed at him with a wronged expression, and so Zhou Zishu asked, "What?"

Zhang Chengling said, "Shifu, I don't understand."

Zhou Zishu inhaled deeply, feeling that since he had accepted Zhang Chengling calling him "Shifu", logically, he should have some patience with him. And so he suppressed his temper, slowed his speech, and asked with what he felt was great patience, "Which part of it do you not understand?"

Zhang Chengling glanced at him, lowered his head silently, and mumbled, "All of it..."

Without a word, Zhou Zishu relocated his gaze to look somewhere else. He held it in for a long while, but finally could not hold it in any longer. "Kid, is that thing on top of your neck a head, or a chamberpot?!"

Off to one side, Wen Kexing was enjoying the show; witnessing this situation, he went up to pull them apart, actively imagining himself to be the kind father beside a strict mother. Half-pleased with himself and half-smug, he told Zhou Zishu merrily, "That's enough, do you know how to teach your disciple? Even the smartest disciple will turn dumb with how much you reprimand him."

Zhou Zishu said, "Why would I not know how to? I single-handedly taught my shidi all he knew."

Wen Kexing's eyes widened slightly, and he asked, curious, "So what did you do when your shidi couldn't recite the mantras, or get the technique right?"

This was quite some time ago; Zhou Zishu frowned as he tried to recall, before he said, "I made him copy three hundred times the rudimentary mantra for practicing qi that every new disciple accepted into our sect has to learn. If he couldn't get it, he could practice at his own pace. If he still didn't get it, he didn't get to eat. And if he still hadn't gotten it by then...he didn't get to sleep either, I'd have people lock his bedroom up at midnight, and order him to stand in the snow to gain an understanding of the concepts on his own."

Hearing this, Zhang Chengling shivered in secret. Wen Kexing paused for half a beat, then sighed, "Your shidi...truly has great fortune in surviving things."

Zhou Zishu paused in his steps. Out of the blue, he said, "He didn't have great fortune. He's dead." Zhang Chengling and Wen Kexing looked at him, but that sickly yellow face of his did not reveal the slightest hint of emotion. Zhou Zishu patted Zhang Chengling's head not too gently, and said straightforwardly, "Learn it properly. If you want to survive for a few days more, you need to be capable."

Then he threw Zhang Chengling to Wen Kexing's care, said, "I'm going to see an old friend. Help me look after him for a bit," and left using qinggong without a single

glance back, leaving Zhang Chengling and Wen Kexing to look at each other incredulously.

After half a beat, Wen Kexing said, with deep feeling, "Your shifu's words are extremely true, you need to be capable--forget it, he's not here, let's swap brains. I'll continue with the second half of the tale of the Red Child I was telling you the previous time."

Zhang Chengling was a good-for-nothing; he instantly brightened up, and the two of them headed towards the nearest tavern as he listened to Wen Kexing narrate, "But what should he do with all those monsters? The Red Child thought for a very long time, tried many things, until he finally thought of an idea. He only needed a magical artefact--"

With one of them making things up as he went along, and the other an enthusiastic audience, the journey was extremely enjoyable. Just as they were about to enter a tavern, out of the blue, they heard a girl from behind them call, "Master! Master, I've finally found you!"

Wen Kexing and Zhang Chengling glanced back to see Gu Xiang skipping towards them. Oddly enough, following behind her was Cao Weining. Wen Kexing could not come up with an explanation for these two had ended up together, but before he could even ask, Gu Xiang chattered on like beans spilling from a cup, "I couldn't find you yesterday, so I went to look for you, and I heard this Cao-dage⁹³ say you and Zhou Xu brought that Zhang kid away, and he volunteered to take me out to look for you!"

Cao Weining grinned dumbly, and repeated, "It's my pleasure, it's my pleasure."

Gu Xiang continued, "Master, Cao-dage isn't only righteous, he's also well-educated, let me tell you..."

Wen Kexing wanted to pretend that he didn't know the two of them, and pulled Zhang Chengling into the tavern.

⁹³ Big brother: term of address for a man slightly older than you

Chapter 34 - Lady Vixen

When Zhou Zishu walked into the bank once more, it wasn't only the shopkeeper who came out to welcome him.

Upon hearing of his arrival, a plump, fortunate-looking man strode out to welcome him. This man had thin brows, thin eyes, and a fleshy nose, his face like a fluffy white bun that had just been taken out of the steamer; it was a pleasing, affable face. Bowing slightly, the shopkeeper very respectfully followed two steps behind this man.

Once he saw Zhou Zishu, he first froze for a moment, before asking, probing, "Are you...Lord Zhou?"

Zhou Zishu smiled, saying, "Why, does Pingan no longer recognise me?"

This man who had come out to welcome him was Boss Song of the "Pingan Bank", Song Pingan. Rumour had it that this man was originally the housekeeper of the Nanning Manor, who came out into the world to start a trading business with some of his savings after his master had passed. Not even a few years had passed, and his business was thriving.

His ventures were everywhere across the country; he never stopped shuttling from one place to another, and no one knew where he would be. Many traders knew that this Boss Song was shrewd at business, but was a rare sort who was righteous and not cunning. Gradually, with great testimonies and ambition to spare, the Song business prospered.

Extremely excited, he ordered the shopkeeper to close up shop, dismissed the assistants, cleaned the place, and invited Zhou Zishu to sit, saying, "This servant was originally near Yangzhou, but I hurried over once I heard the news. Have my subordinates ever given my lord unsatisfactory service? My master has been missing you for a good few years!"

Right after, Pingan lowered his voice. "Many thanks to Lord Zhou, for concealing the news about my master leaving the capital all those years ago, so we can have these few years of peace."

Zhou Zishu took a sip of tea, smiling. "It's no trouble at all, is Seventh Lord faring well?"

Yet he was thinking, trouble only stops when your master dies; if he scrams earlier, everyone can live peacefully.

Pingan smiled. "He's very good, very good, thank you, my lord, for keeping him in your thoughts. This servant sent a letter once he had received the news, and only

just received the master's reply yesterday. He says that he's coming this way with the shaman, and can probably arrive in about ten to fourteen days..."

Hearing this, Zhou Zishu's calm face spasmed once. He thought, the pugilist world of the Central Plains was in enough chaos, and this troublemaker still wanted to add to it--truly a year of bad fortune it was, accumulating all sorts of natural disasters and human catastrophes. Yet, he was still courteous in speech as he said, "How could I possibly trouble Seventh Lord and the shaman?"

Pingan said, "It's nothing, my master has been extremely free with nothing to do after taking up permanent residence at the Southern border, and this is a perfect chance for him to get some exercise. Master has said that he still promised my lord all those years ago to find him a beautiful, slender-waisted Nanjiang lady to be his wife."

Zhou Zishu broke out in a sweat, and said hastily, "I kid, I was just kidding..."

Yet, he inexplicably recalled the previous day in the abandoned courtyard, and the serious manner in which Wen Kexing had said, "I want to live out the rest of my life with you". It felt like the chair underneath his ass had grown nails, making him uncomfortable and feel odd all over.

Pingan exchanged a few niceties with him, before moving onto the topic proper, saying, "This servant has ordered his subordinates to be on the lookout for news about the Lapis Armour my lord has come to ask about. They've found some things these past few days--does my lord know that a man called Shen Zhen appeared at Dongting with a Shaolin reverend yesterday, and brought a piece of Lapis Armour with him?"

Zhou Zishu was stunned. "Shen Zhen, the head of the Shen clan in Shuzhong?"

Pingan nodded. "Yes. This person has stayed away from worldly affairs for a long time, to appear so suddenly now, he must have heard of the Zhang family tragedy, and could wait no longer."

Zhou Zishu's mind whirled instantaneously, and he reacted immediately, saying, "Oh yes, back then, the Lu clan of Taixing didn't have an heir and only had those useless little disciples, who were all handed over to Taishan Sect Leader Hua Fangling. Counting the Zhang family in...could it be that the legendary five pieces of the Lapis Armour is indeed in the hands of the five major clans in the past?"

Pingan said, "Master Zhou can truly infer ten things from one single piece of news. Once Shen Zhen showed up, Gao Cheng also acknowledged the presence of a piece of Lapis Armour at the Gao Family Manor, and finally revealed the story behind this object. Have you heard of the 'Yin Yang Manual', 'Fengshan Sword Technique', and the 'Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra'?"

Zhou Zishu frowned slightly and nodded. "I've only heard little about the Yin Yang Manual; I'm not certain of whether it truly exists or not, but it is said to be a sacred relic of the Healers' Valley, able to revive the dead and grow flesh from white bone, claimed to heal any ailment--Fengshan Sword Technique was created by Rong Xuan, the peerless expert who turned to the demonic path thirty years ago. The lower scroll is a sword technique instruction, while the theory inscribed in the upper scroll was what he had inferred and adapted from the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra. Passed down since ancient times, the 'Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra' has many parts missing. It's obscure and complex, difficult to understand, and one can very easily undergo qi deviation when practicing it. Regardless, its power is unparalleled, with not one competitor in this world that can surpass it...does Gao Chong mean that the secret of the Lapis Armour is the two classic manuals that Rong Xuan had left behind?"

Pingan nodded. "Indeed. According to Hero Gao, Rong Xuan experienced a qi deviation due to the grief of losing his wife, but it was due to his improper technique that his demonic nature burgeoned afterwards. After Rong Xuan died, the few of them found the Lapis Armour, and saw that the two great marvellous techniques and the Healers' Valley 'Yin Yang Manual' were contained in it. But any gongfu practitioner could not possibly withstand the life-ruining temptation of either. They felt that this object was too dangerous, and so smashed the Lapis Armour into pieces, and agreed that each of the five clans would keep a fragment, to prevent these demonic techniques from reappearing on the jianghu."

Zhou Zishu frowned upon hearing this. Half a beat later, he slowly nodded, and said, "That's what Gao Chong said as well..."

Pingan said with an apologetic expression, "This servant's abilities are truly limited."

Zhou Zishu shook his head, smiling, and said, "Not even Tian Chuang and Four Seasons Manor can know all the details of the true happenings of the tragedy thirty years ago, much less you, a businessman. You've already been a great help--although, speaking of which, if the five major clans each holds a fragment of the Lapis Armour, where is the Zhao clan's? Did Zhao Jing give an explanation for this?"

Pingan nodded. "The head of the Zhao clan claimed that the Zhao clan's Lapis Armour had been stolen, and its current whereabouts unknown. Once this news was declared, the crowd almost rioted; the Huashan Sect Leader seemed to have concrete evidence and claimed that Zhao Jing usurped the Zhang family's Lapis Armour. The man that this servant sent there yesterday said that the Huashan Sect Leader and Hero Zhao nearly came to blows."

Zhou Zishu thought of the piece of Lapis Armour that he had seen in the underground cave that day. It was most likely the missing piece the Zhao clan had lost, and the thief was undoubtedly either one of the two who had died that night, Yu

Tianjie or Mu Yunge. Unfortunately, like a mantis stalking the cicada unaware of the oriole behind it, a little ghost from the Ghost Valley had taken advantage, and afterwards, the piece of Lapis Armour had ended up in Wen Kexing's hands by happenstance. Then it had been stolen by Fang Buzhi, but now Fang Buzhi was dead, suspected to have died by the hand of the Delighted Mourning Ghost...

Zhou Zishu felt uncomfortable, like a rock had been placed on his heart, bile surging. He thought, could this matter be any more complex?

Troubled, he bade Pingan farewell, and returned to look for Zhang Chengling. Zhou Zishu did not completely trust what Gao Chong had said--in the past, he had to handle massive amounts of information, and those presented to the Emperor had to be the absolute truth ridden of falsehoods. To examine a piece of information, he usually had to verify in detail the causes and consequences of it, until there were entirely no faults in the information, before he dared present it. This was why he was used to doubting anything that he heard while semi-believing it, ready to override any previous information that he knew at any moment.

Entering the tavern, he raised his head and immediately glimpsed Wen Kexing and Zhang Chengling with Cao Weining and Gu Xiang, and wondered how these four people had managed to convene with one another. Soon afterwards, he noticed that Zhang Chengling and Wen Kexing were occupying a corner of the table each with exceptionally grave expressions. Unclear on why so, he walked upstairs, about to greet them, right as he heard Cao Weining air his opinions.

“...What I'm actually most concerned about is the arson in the backyard of a righteous, orthodox clan. Everyone's damaging friendly ties for this Lapis Armour, have they not heard of the tale of Two 'Li's Killing Three Warriors'?⁹⁴ I only fear that a catastrophe befalls the pugilist world because of this, and until then, it'll be a 'stream of corpses'⁹⁵.”

Very foolishly and naively, Gu Xiang asked, “Stream of what?”

⁹⁴ Actually Two 'Tao's Killing Three Gentlemen: To get rid of his three mighty generals as a preventive measure, a king makes them share two priceless peaches (桃, tao). The first two take the peaches, but the third, finding it unfair, reports his own accomplishments. Seeing that the third general is far more meritorious, the first two commit suicide out of shame. The third then kills himself out of regret at causing the deaths of the first two. Here, Cao Weining probably confuses it with another saying 桃(tao)李(li)满天下, and erroneously substitutes 'tao' with 'li'.

⁹⁵ 逝者如斯夫 refers to time passing very quickly and implies that one should treasure the moment, but here Cao Weining uses it wrongly (again). 逝者 can refer to the deceased, and 如斯夫 a 'stream of men', so Cao Weining interprets the line to be referring to a river of corpses.

Cao Weining prattled on patiently, “‘By the riverside I exclaimed, the corpses flow like a river.’ It describes how the elderly Laozi felt as if his spirit had visited the riverside one night in a dream, and looked down to see the dead flowing downstream with the running water. Extremely melancholic, he was inspired...”

Eyes wide, Gu Xiang exclaimed, “Master, Cao-dage knows so much, he even drops literary references!”

Zhou Zishu immediately understood why Zhang Chengling’s and Wen Kexing’s expressions were so solemn. Assuming indifference, he turned on his foot, and headed outside.

But he was spotted by the sharp-eyed, loose-lipped Wen Kexing, a person who had to bring others down into the muck with him regardless, who immediately yelled with fervour, “A-Xu, why are you walking out? We’ve been waiting for you for so long, come over quickly!”

...Zhou Zishu thought, this jinx⁹⁶ Valley Master Wen really embodied eight bloody lifetimes’ worth of iniquity.

Wen Kexing happily pulled a chair out, told Zhou Zishu to sit down, and personally poured wine for him, eagerly attentive as he said, “Quick, taste this tavern’s good wine, the taste is traditional, it’s not bad.”

Expressionless, Zhou Zishu attempted to use his gaze to convey his evaluation of him. Wen Kexing looked at him for half a beat, then all of a sudden, said in a coy voice, “We’re still in public...”

Seeing this, Gu Xiang covered Zhang Chengling’s eyes with a hand and said, with a grimace, “Even a dog’s eyes will be blinded.”

With a red face, Cao Weining stammered, “Miss, Miss, Miss Gu, a-actually, you don’t have to envy Zhou-xiong and Wen-xiong’s deep love, you’re as beautiful as a flower, there must be...must be...someone who secretly admires you...”

Gu Xiang blinked her wide, innocent eyes at him, asking, “Ah? Really? Where?”

Cao Weining stared at her in a daze, half a beat later, he asked in a non-sequitur, “Miss Gu, c-c-can I call you A-Xiang too?”

Zhou Zishu lowered his head to drink his wine in great concentration, reminding himself that it was impolite to have seen or heard anything; it was as agonising as

⁹⁶ 瘟神 literally translates to "god of plague" (ie. plague-bearer), but 瘟 (wen) is also a homophone for Wen Kexing’s surname.

sitting on a carpet of nails, disgusting him until even his tongue was numb. It was the first time in his life where he failed to taste what was in his cup.

But at this moment, a person walked in through the door. Upon laying eyes on this person, the raucous tavern quietened down in an instant--this was a woman, who walked in with her gaze fixed on something in particular. Noticing the waiter carrying plates staring at her, completely floored,⁹⁷ she smiled slightly, and the plates in the waiter's hands fell and shattered on the floor.

She was truly too beautiful; in that instant, most of the people who laid eyes on her came to the unanimous decision that she was the most beautiful woman that they had seen in their lives. Even Gu Xiang was agape for a moment, before she tugged at Cao Weining's sleeve, whispering, "Look at her, she isn't a goddess, is she?"

Yet, Cao Weining only glanced once in the direction Gu Xiang was looking in and rescinded his attention, whispering, "This woman's gaze strays and drifts--the books on physiognomy call this an 'intoxicating gaze', she absolutely has no good intentions, and cannot compare with...with..."

His last few words were mumbled very softly, so softly that Gu Xiang, who was staring transfixed at the beauty, did not notice.

But a chuckle escaped Wen Kexing, who mused that Cao Weining was not a quick person himself, and no wonder was so was averse to others whose gazes strayed quickly. Even the one he had set his heart on was Gu Xiang, who was always in a daze.

That beauty swept her gaze around the place once, then came upstairs, heading in their direction. She didn't look at anyone else, her gaze locked solely on Zhou Zishu, as if her pair of amorous eyes had only space for him. She sauntered over to stand beside him, and bent to say with a flowery breath, "Could I ask you to buy me a drink?"

This was Lady Luck fallen from the heavens--anyone would have been disoriented upon impact. But without even waiting for Zhou Zishu to speak, a third-wheeling hand shot out from one side and planted itself between them like a barricade. Wen Kexing stuck his hand into Zhou Zishu's robes, fished his coin pouch out in the blink of an eye, and boldly shoved it into his own robes, then said calmly, "Miss, I'm afraid not."

⁹⁷ Priest uses "呆若木鸡" (lit. 'dazed like a wooden chicken') and says that the 化成呆头鹅的 (lit. 'transformed into a dazed goose') waiter lets the plates slip and shatter.

Chapter 35 - Green Vixen

Zhou Zishu raised his head to study this beauty, the expression on his face gentle, and asked softly, “Miss, does this humble one know you?”

That beautiful woman chuckled. “Are you unwilling to buy me a drink just because you don’t recognise me?”

Zhou Zishu smiled, and said, “How am I unwilling? Never mind a flask of wine, with such a character like yours, miss, even if you want to consume my flesh, drink my blood, this humble one won’t even bat an eye--waiter, serve us a flask of good wine.”

Then he paused, swept an eye over Wen Kexing and his unfriendly mien, and pointed to him, telling the waiter, “Put it on his tab.”

This was the first time Gu Xiang had seen such vibrant reds and purples blooming on her own master’s face, and she instantly felt that this meal was so, so worth it.

That beautiful woman tittered, her laughter like a shivering branch of flowers, like silver pearls pattering onto a jade plate; a piece by “Enchanted Song” Qin Song was nothing compared to her voice. The wine was served quickly, and Zhou Zishu said, “Please sit, miss.”

The beautiful woman touched his shoulder with a slender hand, and murmured gently, “It’s alright, I’m leaving right after I’m done drinking.”

Zhou Zishu uttered an “ah”, his expression revealing a hint of his disappointment. Wen Kexing huffed coldly, and said, “Yes, this table was getting a little too squeezey.”

The beautiful woman glanced at Wen Kexing, and knocked back the cup of wine. Even the manner in which she had drunk it was far better looking than those of others, not a single flaw in her graceful action of picking up the cup and drinking it. Zhou Zishu’s gaze could hardly bear to leave her face even for a second. The beautiful woman set down the empty cup, extended a finger to gently trace Zhou Zishu’s cheek, and asked, “I’m leaving, are you coming with?”

Without another word, Zhou Zishu immediately stood up and left with her, not even sparing a single backward glance. There was a “crack” as the chopsticks in Wen Kexing’s hand snapped into two; Gu Xiang and Zhang Chengling lowered their heads instantly, pretending as if they had seen nothing. Cao Weining, on the other hand, was full of righteous anger, pointing in the direction where that despicable couple had headed to, fuming, “This injustice, Wen-xiong has always felt so deeply for him, how could he be like this, in the face of beauty...of beauty...”

Abandoning brotherhood in the face of beauty?⁹⁸ It didn't seem right either. Cao Weining bit down on his tongue.

Wen Kexing whipped around to look at him, feeling for the first time that this dumb child surnamed Cao was this comfortable to the eye, and came to seek comfort with a face like he was about to cry--this time, Gu Xiang was the one to bite down on her tongue.

But Cao Weining pondered over it for a while, and told Wen Kexing with a straight face, "This matter...I don't think it's as simple as it looks, ai, Wen-xiong, I was overhasty in making my comments earlier, don't take them to heart. Zhou-xiong isn't that kind of person, he must have some kind of unlamentable woe to resort to such an undesirable solution, don't misunderstand him."

Gu Xiang jumped instantly, "Yes, Master, don't misunderstand him. See, Zhou Xu's heel is pointing towards you--you can tell that he's leaving very unwillingly."

This time round, even Cao Weining could tell that Gu Xiang's words were getting ridiculous, and he could only look at her resignedly and with some embarrassment.

Zhang Chengling said, "Gu Xiang-jiejie, you'd better stop saying things."

Suddenly, Wen Kexing stood up without a word, turned and left, chasing after Zhou Zishu, leaving the three of them to glance at each other. Gu Xiang swallowed, and whispered, "My master is desperate, now."

Cao Weining shook his head, sighing, "It is truly 'When the wind and rain comes in the night, who knows how many tears are shed...'⁹⁹ Ever since the ancient times, the single word "love" has always inflicted the deepest wounds, but what can we do about it?"

Zhang Chengling thought, what else can I say? So he remained silent, and lowered his head to continue eating.

That beautiful woman brought Zhou Zishu to a narrow alley, turning left and right around corners, until they entered a courtyard, in which a few plum trees, out of flowering season, were planted. She pushed open the door of the house, and a faint perfumed scent wafted out. Raising the bead curtain, she leant half her weight on the door frame, asking delicately, "Why, aren't you going to enter?"

Following her gaze, Zhou Zishu surveyed the inside of the room. From the open door, he could see the vague outlines of a folding screen and a bed, the dresser slanted

⁹⁸ Basically "bros before hoes"

⁹⁹ Original quote from the poem is 夜来风雨声，花落知多少：When the wind and rain comes in the night, who knows how many flowers have fallen

in a corner, and a woman's long dress hanging by the bronze mirror. The rouge box was uncapped, her makeup box in a mess--so the legendary tender, enticing land of women was no more than this.

Zhou Zishu smiled as he shook his head. "This humble one is a sleazy man, how can I enter a maiden's boudoir so easily?"

The beautiful woman laughed. "You've become a gentleman all of a sudden. Will you still not come in, even if I invite you in?"

Zhou Zishu smiled again, lowering his head to look at the tip of his shoe, and said, "May this miss forgive me. Even if this humble one had the additional courage of another man's, I dare not enter this house that has 'Rouge's Grave' incense burning; if I enter standing, I'll have to be carried out as a corpse."

The corner of the beautiful woman's mouth stiffened slightly, but she immediately smiled thereafter. "You men, doesn't the saying go 'Die under the peony,¹⁰⁰ and even your ghost will be a womanizing one?' Why is it that you've already followed me here, but fail at this juncture?"

Zhou Zishu said, "That is indeed the saying, but it's better to live when you have the opportunity to. The longer you live, the more times you can pass under the peony, don't you agree? Plus, I don't have the charm for you to pick me out from a crowd of thousands and insist on marrying me and only me; this humble one still has this bit of self-awareness, and this miss really thinks too highly of me. Why not make this more satisfying for both of us by cutting straight to the point of what it is that you're after? Say it, and perhaps...we can still have a good discussion."

The beautiful woman looked at him and sighed breezily. "If I didn't go for you, who else could I have gone for? Amongst that group of you, if it's not a girl, it's a naive child, or a dumb idiot who's head over heels for that silly girl, and the other one..."

She paused slightly. "The other one is even odder. Starting from the moment I walked in, he didn't even glance at me once, but looked only at you, a 'sleazy man'. Don't you think it's weird? Ai, looking around, you're the only normal man; if I didn't go for you, who else could I go for?"

Zhou Zishu coughed, immediately regretting his own question, and said in a straightforward manner, "If this miss is after the Lapis Armour, you can go back. I don't have the Zhang family piece, but I heard that Hero Gao and Hero Shen each took out a piece yesterday. If you're coveting it, you might as well pay them a visit and ask about it."

¹⁰⁰ Refers to women (aka dying underneath a woman in the middle of sex).

The beautiful woman narrowed her eyes slightly. Letting go of the bead curtain in her hand, she said softly, "I will eventually get my hands on the full Lapis Armour, no matter whose hands it is in now. You say you don't have it, but on what basis should I believe your words? Don't you men like telling lies the most?"

Zhou Zishu leaned under the plum tree, neither nodding his head or shaking it, gazing at the beautiful woman's face for a while with a calm expression, before he suddenly mused, "This miss' demeanour and movements are outstanding, amongst those of the many women I've met."

This was originally a compliment, yet for some unknown reason, once the beautiful woman heard this, she couldn't maintain the smile on her face any longer, and screeched indecorously, "What did you say?"

Zhou Zishu shook his head and murmured, "I was just saying that this miss has a beautiful character; even if your looks are ordinary, your beautiful qualities are difficult to hide. Why be obsessed with physical beauty, and end up with something inferior? I had a friend who once said that a person's looks are casted by heaven--one looks exactly like how she should, and once there's any slight change to them, others can spot it, and that gives her away. From what I see, this miss' techniques are considerably skilled, yet, how do you not know of these doctrines?"

The beautiful woman's expression turned frosty. "Was your intent in following me to humiliate me?"

Zhou Zishu shook his head, and said gently. "This humble one did not have that intention." --Outsiders to the craft of disguise could not discern anything off the mark, but craftsmen of the trade knew plenty of tricks. Zhou Zishu was used to observing people; one look, and he could tell that although this woman was elegant and graceful, she was no longer young. But her face and neck, and even the colour of her hands, were extremely natural, so natural that they seemed real without the slightest flaw. Of the techniques in the world, the only one that could achieve this sort of standard...was the unparalleled, signature set of skills only imparted by the Four Seasons Manor in the past--although it was unknown where she had learnt it from.

The beautiful woman chuckled coldly, and said, "Sure, I'll let you know, then."

She took out a silk handkerchief and a small bottle of ointment from her robes, poured the liquid onto the handkerchief, and started rubbing at her face. That face as beautiful as a picture flaked off bit by bit with her actions, her skin fading in colour,

her features changing in shape. From the left side of her face, she peeled off a human skin mask as thin as a cricket's wing, exactly like the painted skin¹⁰¹ of the myths.

Zhou Zishu held his breath. This woman originally was not ugly; although she wasn't as earth-shattering a beauty like she had painted herself to be, she could definitely be considered a beautiful woman--if it weren't for the lumpy, sinister burn scar across the left side of her face.

In that moment, he knew who this woman was, and the words leapt out of his mouth. "You are...Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao?"

Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao was nothing pleasant; rumour had it that she had a thousand painted skins, and was well-versed in the art of beguilement. She loved to transform herself into a beauty to seduce young men, absorbing their spiritual essence¹⁰² until they died. She had been the cause of countless cases, but her repertoire of disguises was too diverse for anyone to arrest her.

Liu Qianqiao chuckled coldly. "Now, you understand why I must have the Lapis Armour, don't you?"

Zhou Zishu was silent for a while. "You aren't after the Fengshan Sword Manual, but the Yin Yang Manual."

She had many faces, but her own face was one that could never see the light of day in her lifetime. It was the natural law of the universe for a woman to be vain about her appearance; an ordinary woman could perform many appalling acts for a good-looking face, much less her.

If a person well-versed in the art of disguise did not guard their own heart well and became obsessed with their physical appearance--swapping out a thousand masks until they couldn't remember their own name most of the time, or whether they were originally pretty or ugly, wasn't that close to insanity?

Zhou Zishu shook his head. "The Zhang family's piece of the Lapis Armour really isn't with any of us."

Liu Qianqiao chuckled coldly. A dagger flashed in her hand, and without warning, struck towards Zhou Zishu. Whirling around, Zhou Zishu dodged the strike, curling his fingers to catch her wrist. Unexpectedly, a circle of needles like those of a porcupine shot out around her wrist, shining with a blue light, and a gust of fog

¹⁰¹ 画皮: A story from Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (compiled 1740) about a merchant who brings a pretty woman home only to discover that she's a heart-eating demon who wears a suit of beautiful human skin.

¹⁰² In Taoist lore, this also means their jizz. Basically, she likes marathon sex until the other person dies.

poured from her sleeve. Zhou Zishu hastily retracted his hand, retreating in three quick steps as he held his breath. Liu Qianqiao's figure flashed, and was gone.

She only left the words, "Wait and see!"

Zhou Zishu sighed, suddenly anxious about the road ahead. There was the Green Vixen today; who knew, who would come tomorrow? Zhang Chengling, this person, was the biggest trouble on earth--no wonder the two old foxes Gao Chong and Zhao Jing had let him take this nuisance away so freely that day.

He turned to leave, and had just pushed the courtyard door open when a hand reached out from one side and grabbed his shoulder as quickly as lightning. Reflexively, Zhou Zishu sunk his shoulder and retracted his arm; missing the hit, he instantly changed postures, striking with the blade of his palm. That person took the hit, made a low sound of pain, and latched onto him, moaning, "Mariticide..."

Zhou Zishu kicked him away, crossing his arms, frowning. "Valley Master Wen, have you forgotten to take the medication for your madness today?"

Wen Kexing bared his teeth as he pressed his hand against his ribs as if they were going to break, but insisted, "You left with another woman right in front of me! How dare you meet her clandestinely in this sort of place? A single bachelor and an unmarried woman alone together in broad daylight..."

Zhou Zishu casually said, "Isn't it time for you to go mess around in the brothel for the whole day?"

Once these words left his mouth, Zhou Zishu nearly swallowed his tongue in regret, thinking that he must have been too muddled by anger, to even say this sort of thing.

Wen Kexing stilled for a moment, then came up to glue himself to him, smiling cheekily and unabashedly, "Ever since I decided to cling to you, I've never touched anyone else."

Zhou Zishu said with an insincere smile, "Many thanks to the Valley Master for his deep love. I'm very sorry, but I didn't decide to cling to you, 'Valley Master'."

Wen Kexing thought for a while, and seemed to find it reasonable, so he nodded and said, "That's true--although, while you can meet clandestinely with people as you like, I can also listen in on your liaisons in the bedroom anytime I like."

Zhou Zishu said, "Valley Master Wen, do you know how the word 'shameless' ought to be written?"

Wen Kexing said brazenly, “When it’s time to be shameless, one should be shameless.”

Zhou Zishu lowered his head, and used all of his might to uncurl his fingers from a fist. Yet his five fingers seemed to be heartsick for one another and kept gathering, trembling with the desire to have a go at the face of this person in front of him.

So he forced himself to look away from that face of Wen Kexing’s, and turned around to leave in a huff--even forgetting to ask for his coin pouch back.

Chapter 36 - No Regrets

There was an elderly man in the corner, whom the kind waiter didn't chase away. The old man's body was like it had shrivelled up in water, his face full of wrinkles, dressed head to toe in old and ratty cotton robes, his sparse whiskers disheveled. His hands were pressed together palm-to-palm as he knelt on the floor, bowing continuously to those who passed. A chipped bowl was placed beside him.

Zhang Chengling peeped at him, his ears full of Cao Weining's sophisticated musing. "...They say the scent of chrysanthemum comes from the bitter cold..."¹⁰³

"That's not right, Cao-dage, chrysanthemums bloom in autumn, is autumn that cold?"

Cao Weining coughed. "Most of these poets sigh over things not worth sighing about, contributing nothing useful to society. They're a generation of loafers who compose boring things about nature in their libraries. Being unable to tell which season chrysanthemums blossom in is typical of them!"

"Oh, they're really a bunch of slacking bookworms who don't know anything, ahahaha..."

When Cao Weining and Gu Xiang started to discuss the beauty of the four seasons and poetry, they could drive a person to insanity. Zhang Chengling tolerated it for as long as he could, and when he finally could not bear it any longer, he dug out a few copper coins, walked downstairs, and bent to put them in the old beggar's bowl.

The old man rambled, "Good philanthropist, thank you, philanthropist, may the most merciful and compassionate Goddess of Mercy protect you..."

Zhang Chengling's lips tightened as he squeezed out a laborious smile. His father was the true humanitarian, who the heavens had protected for a lifetime. Except for that one night, the gods had gotten drunk, didn't keep watch, and his father had died.

The good had to rely on the heavens for protection, but the evil could live on viciously. Wasn't this too laughable?

He sat on the steps, and of his own accord, started reciting the things Zhou Zishu taught him, but was still befuddled about a great many things. As he recited on like a little monk reciting scriptures, his mind wandered, his gaze drifting somewhere far away, his heart wondering why his shifu was not back yet. The first thing his shifu would do upon returning would be to scold him, why did he have to be this stupid?

¹⁰³ Original quote: 梅花香自苦寒来, "the scent of plum comes from the bitter cold", as plum blossoms survive the winter to bloom.

As a child half-matured, his bones were growing furiously; the clothes that Zhao Jing had ordered tailors to make for him a few months ago, when they had just reached the Zhao Family Manor, were small on him now. The legs of his pants were a good few inches shorter, the hems hanging laughably above his ankles.

Zhang Chengling dipped his head, reached out his fingers to pinch the hem of his trousers, rolled them up and unrolled them again--thinking, I'm not this stupid on purpose, who doesn't want to be a bit smarter, so that they can master abilities a little earlier, to seek revenge for their family a little sooner?

He recalled that time in childhood, when the shifu teaching him martial arts had complained about him to his father. His father had only patted his head, and said to that shifu with an apologetic smile, "Please be more forgiving on him. It's like how the five fingers on a hand do not grow to be the same length--this boy of mine had a bout of fever when he was younger, and is slower than others. But he's a good kid, I don't expect him to become something great in the future. As long as he can take good care of himself, that's good enough."

In this world, if there were emperors and rulers that accomplished great things, there also had to be peddlers and messengers dealing with insignificant affairs, otherwise, could the world even function?

Zhang Chengling felt that he was probably born to be a peddler or a messenger, yet the heavens didn't let him lead a peaceful life, forcing him to grow in the mold of his shifu, of Uncle Zhao. Wasn't this depriving him of a livelihood?

There were many things that his puny teenage brain could not make sense of. It could not make sense of the theories his shifu taught him, could not make sense of the sword techniques Senior Wen had taught him, could not make sense of destiny, and could not make sense of how he should proceed from here. A thought suddenly flashed past in his mind--if he could not live on, he should just die.

The thought of seeking death was far too painful; his eyes stung, and he nearly couldn't hold back his tears. Involuntarily, he thought of his shifu's unimpressed face, recalled him saying "Leaking horse piss at the slightest thing, are you still a man?", and forced his tears back.

Deeply immersed in his warring thoughts, Zhang Chengling did not notice that the black-veiled performer playing and singing the tavern was plucking at the strings of their instrument, while slowly closing in on him...

Meanwhile, just as Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing had been about to leave the alley one after the other, the atmosphere between them odd, a woman's scream came out of the blue from nearby. Zhou Zishu paused in his steps.

Right afterwards, a white shadow flashed in front of their eyes, and with a ‘plop’, the Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao was tossed onto the ground like a burlap sack by the intruder. She rolled to the side, trying to get up, but her acupuncture needles looked to have been sealed as she collapsed back down.

This person, who had no tender pity for the fairer sex and casually flung people around, was none other than that old glutton Ye Baiyi.

Ye Baiyi pointed at Liu Qianqiao, and asked Zhou Zishu, “What’s with this ugly freak mad like a dog? ”

These words struck a nerve of Liu Qianqiao’s, and she glared at Ye Baiyi like she wanted to slice him into a thousand pieces. In that moment, Zhou Zishu realised--the reason why this Ye person was this odd, was most probably because he had been single for all of his life; if a woman was willing to spend the rest of her life with someone like him, never mind climbing a tree, a female pig would ascend to heaven!

Wen Kexing caught up, grabbing Zhou Zishu’s wrist as he stepped forward, and glared at Ye Baiyi--for some unknown reason, this Valley Master Wen radiated strong enmity towards Elder Ye, but of course, this reason could be something similar to the bestial instinct that made wolves and dogs guard their food--only to hear Wen Kexing say, very unhappily, “Why is it you again, hanging around like a spectre haunting us?”

Ye Baiyi glanced at him and ignored him. It was almost as if Ye Baiyi’s tolerance of him had increased by plenty ever since Wen Kexing had boldly promised to take his life within ten years. Pointing at Liu Qianqiao, he said coolly, “I came over because I was chasing a thief. Just as I was about to catch him, this woman suddenly leapt out, blocking my path insistently, and the thief escaped.”

Zhou Zishu frowned as he regarded Liu Qianqiao, and asked Ye Baiyi, “Thief? Senior is so loftily above mortal affairs, but has become a constable who arrests thieves? What thief is so remarkable, what did he steal?”

Ye Baiyi said, “The night after you left, the Gao Family Manor was burgled. What else could have they stolen?”

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu looked at each other, stunned--what kind of person was that, who had the ability to steal from the heavily guarded Gao Family Manor?

Ye Baiyi cast an eye at Zhou Zishu, and said, “Kid, you’d better watch out. Shen Zhen is dead.”

Even with his quick reflexes, Zhou Zishu could not help but pause, wondering what Shen Zhen’s death had to do with him and why he had to be cautious. Before he could speak, Wen Kexing had already asked on his behalf, “So what?”

Ye Baiyi didn't answer, but raised his head to look past the two of them. A very distinct line formed between his brows--unbelievably, this stone buddha frowned.

A frosty harrumph sounded from behind the two of them, and someone said, "Of course it has to do with you. That day, Hero Gao received a note. On it was written, 'If you want Zhang Chengling alive, exchange the Lapis Armour for it'. Out of concern for the son of an old friend, Hero Shen immediately left to trace the sender down, but when we found him, he was already a corpse. In his hand, he was still gripping a note identical to the one Hero Gao had received, and the Gao Family Manor was burgled that night. You tell us, what does it have to do with you?"

Hearing a disorganised mess of footsteps, Zhou Zishu knew that a huge crowd had arrived. Suspicion rising in his heart, he turned around and discovered that the one who had spoken was the Cangsan Sect Leader Huang Daoren, whom he had sent flying that day. Huang Daoren was unusually smug when he had spoken; together with his rat-like features, he looked like a gigantic rodent whose tail was sticking straight up in great pomposity.

Zhou Zishu didn't know why, but his hands and feet were suddenly itching to send him flying another time.

Not too far behind Huang Daoren, Yu Qiufeng stood calmly, his face still as water as he asked, "Master Zhou, could you explain where you went that day, after taking the Zhang boy away from right under the public eye?"

As the saying goes, "a spell of autumn rain, a bout of frost"; after that night of autumn rain at Dongting, the weather was close to freezing. Yet at the present moment, the Huashan Sect Leader could still waft his fan in hand, interrogating Zhou Zishu on the streets with clearly-enunciated words, giving off the slight air of someone independent of worldly affairs--it was most probably that the people around him could not stand such a cool breeze, and fled from his iron fan.¹⁰⁴

Zhou Zishu paused, dipped his head, and chuckled suddenly, asking, "Why, does everyone here feel that other than kidnapping Zhang Chengling and obtaining the Zhang family's Lapis Armour, I also took him hostage and ransomed him for the other two pieces from the Gao Family Manor?"

Huang Daoren said, "Isn't that the case?"

¹⁰⁴ In *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong has to borrow the Demonic Lady's iconic iron fan to put out the hellfire so their retinue can proceed. On a related note, Red Child, aka the main character in the tales *Wen Kexing* tells Zhang Chengling, is the Demonic Lady's son.

Zhou Zishu raised his head to look at the sky and sighed lightly all of a sudden, shaking his head. "I was wrong. Why did I ever think that a pig's brain could come up with human ideas..."

Wen Kexing supplemented sagely, "Nothing surpasses learning from your mistakes; it is the greatest blessing of all to change in your misguided ways."

"You..." Huang Daoren was just about to go up to him, only for Yu Qiufeng to snap his folding fan shut and stop him with an arm in front of him, addressing Zhou Zishu, "Master Zhou, may I ask this then? We, together with Young Hero Ye, were chasing a scumbag that had been loitering suspiciously at the Gao Family Manor. Why did this scumbag disappear at this spot, as we run into you two instead, and..."

He cast his eyes downwards and met Liu Qianqiao's gaze by chance. Like she had been doused with cold water, Liu Qianqiao shivered lightly, but Yu Qiufeng chuckled, and dragged his tone out as he said, "Oh? This lady can't be the legendary Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao, can she? With her thousand variations unpredictable by even god or ghost, to what does this humble Yu owe the pleasure, to be able to witness this individual's...true face--it is truly the luck of three lifetimes."

Once the words "Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao" left his mouth, surprise, disgust, and scorn flitted past on the faces of the crowd behind Yu Qiufeng; it seemed like this woman's reputation was already rotten to a certain degree. Her acupuncture points had been sealed by Ye Baiyi, and she could not flush them clear even with her full might. Laying on the ground like that, her face flushed red, the scar on her left cheek seemed to throb vividly, appearing even more terrifying and repulsive.

Out of the blue, Zhou Zishu recalled the moment she had walked into the tavern, each step and lift of her hand confident and effortless, graceful as a fairy, attracting everyone's admiring gaze in an instant. He walked towards her, eyes fixed on her; even though he knew that she was not worth sympathy, a slight trace of pity for her rose in him.

Was one's appearance really that important?

Liu Qianqiao looked at Yu Qiufeng. Her mouth opened, as if she wanted to speak, but her lips quivered twice, and she swallowed the words back down.

Ye Baiyi suddenly spoke. "Not his doing."

Yu Qiufeng chuckled, and said, "Hero Ye is still young and has lived on Changming Mountain for a long time, and thus still does not understand that people have treacherous hearts and minds--if Master Zhou claims that he has no relation to this matter at all, do you dare to strip, and let us check if there's a ghost mask on the small of your back?"

Wen Kexing instantly yelped, “What? Even if he strips, he can’t strip for you. Who do you think you are?”

Yu Qiufeng ignored him, focusing all of his attention on only Zhou Zishu, asking, “Does Master Zhou refuse because he has something on him that is too disreputable to show others?”

Too disreputable to show others? A sense of self-mockery rose in his heart. This all was too ridiculous--there was absolutely nothing on the small of his back, but he had seven nails in his chest. Yet, weren’t they like the ghost mask, something that could only stay hidden in the shadows?

Suddenly, he laughed, thinking: Why should I have to stay hidden in the shadows? Back when the previous Emperor had been on the throne, I was the one who set a domino chain of plans in motion to wipe out the Second Prince’s gang, and was the one who picked out a whole bunch of worms who had eaten holes in the rotten court. Back when the Northern brutes had invaded the Central Plains and were headed straight for the capital, I was the one who guarded the Chengwu Gate to the death, without budging a single inch. The reason why this nation of Daqing can gradually recover from the winds and storms and the thousand holes riddled into it to show a hint of liveliness, so that all of you may live and work in peace freely, even snap at each other like dogs because you have nothing better to do--all the dirty, disreputable work behind a glorious era, I managed it all single-handedly--back then, my methods were vicious, and I hurt people, but today, I too can drag this broken body and despicable soul to do good and accumulate good karma. From the beginning to the end, my conscience has been clear, so why do I have to hide in the shadows?!

Zhou Zishu’s gaze swept across Yu Qiufeng, and after a moment’s silence, he said lightly, “Yeah, who do you think you are?”

Chapter 37 - Circus

In those ten years, in which he had been living as neither man nor ghost, his heart was iron and stone--never once uncertain, and never once panicked. Shouldering the responsibility of the Four Seasons Manor as a child of fifteen, meeting the Crown Prince Helian Yi by chance which sparked his youthful heroism at eighteen, establishing Tian Chuang single-handedly at twenty-three; all that he should have done, he had completed.

Even if his name could not be recorded in the annals, the mountains and the rivers of this nation were monuments of his contributions.

As Zhou Zishu said this, the corner of his mouth lifted slightly, making it seem even more like a grimace. But the gaze he cast over on them was like the sweep of a frosty beam of light; in that instant, Huang Daoren hesitated in his steps, and an urge to retreat suddenly surfaced in his heart. But after glimpsing Yu Qiufeng in the corner of his eye, he had no choice but to stand firm.

Huang Daoren had always felt that Yu Qiufeng and his dead son were superficial pretty faces; they were useless at everything, and could only rely on their sect--which was steadily waning by the day--to sufficiently maintain appearances to squeeze themselves into being included amongst the few major sects. Cangsan Sect had always had good relations with Huashan Sect all along, and Huang Daoren felt that he was helping these pretty but useless faces out in all aspects on behalf of their sect ties. For one, he could brag about how honourable he was, and for another, he pitied Yu Qiufeng.

In front of such a pitiful and cowardly man, how could Huang Daoren retreat?

He silently drew an evaluation of the large crowd behind him, and was instantly assured, thinking, there are so many of us; even if each one of us only stamped on you once, it's enough to flatten you into noodles. And thus he shouted with great vigour, "What's there to talk to him about, we'll know once we arrest and interrogate him!"

His voice was an explosion right by Yu Qiufeng's ear; frowning lightly, Yu Qiufeng distractedly fanned himself a few times with that landscape-illustrated fan, his face tilted slightly to the side. He was thoroughly annoyed by having to team up with cads like Huang Daoren, feeling that other than his plain looks, his actions and manner was more like a village hooligan's--even the pig-slaughtering, meat-dicing butcher at the market was more refined than he was. Not only was Huang Daoren simple-minded, but he also still liked to run about, with villages within ten li able to hear his voice once he opened his mouth as if he was afraid that no one knew he was there.

Yu Qiufeng regarded Zhou Zishu with a frosty smile and didn't pick up where Huang Daoren had left off, thinking that if it weren't for the weakening might of the

Huashan Sect in these recent years, and that he was worried that it would be difficult for them to succeed without support, how would he be willing to claim brotherhood with this sort of slimy person? If this dumbass was willing to take the charge, he would let him; it was just as well that these two people were of unknown background and undetermined expertise, and no one knew what kind of attitude the descendant of the ancient monk held. He would use Huang Daoren to test the waters.

And thus something awkward happened--Huang Daoren's intention was for Yu Qiufeng to pick up from where he had left off once he was done shouting, and have the crowd behind him swarm all at once thereafter, so he would not have to put in any effort and could still wait smugly off to one side. Yet, he had not expected Yu Qiufeng to remain silent, waiting for him to charge ahead into danger. Unclear of the situation, the crowd behind Huang Daoren only stared at him, and no one moved a single step.

Tens of people clogged the narrow alleyway, but in that instant, not one person spoke up, leaving the alley in pindrop silence.

In half a lifetime's worth of existence, Wen Kexing had never witnessed such a bizarre sight. He had always been the sort to laugh when he wanted, cry when he desired, and play the ruffian when he felt like it—not bothering to be polite, he cackled uproariously, pointing at Huang Daoren as he booed, “I say, don't tell me that the few of you didn't rehearse this properly and have forgotten your lines? Get off the stage, how is it that you dare come perform the opera when you haven't even familiarised yourself with the steps? You won't earn any tips from anyone.”

After observing the situation for half a beat, Ye Baiyi said, “What is this nonsense.” And turned to leave, neglecting Liu Qianqiao. In a flash, there was no trace of his white figure.

Thinking this entire encounter a circus, Zhou Zishu did not feel like entertaining these people any longer. He made to leave, but Huang Daoren gave a strange shout of, “Kid, don't think you can go!”, and pounced. Zhou Zishu's figure straightened all of a sudden, and without looking back, he ordered, “Get lost!¹⁰⁵” A whirl of his long sleeve birthed two gusts of force; with great accuracy, one hit Huang Daoren in the shoulder, the other on his knee, and Huang Daoren was really as well-behaved as a filial child, rolling away obediently.

Wen Kexing was laughing so hard that he had to support himself with the wall, unable to stand straight. It was his first time discovering that this Zhou Xu was not only likable, but also had a sense of mischief that he did not realise he himself possessed, and this was too interesting.

¹⁰⁵ 滚: lit. to roll away

But tragedy struck before he was done laughing; while everyone's attention was focused on Zhou Zishu, Yu Qiufeng suddenly caused trouble. His long sword whistled as it left the scabbard, thrust towards Wen Kexing's neck without warning.

Even though each word of his earlier was aimed at Zhou Zishu as if he had not seen Wen Kexing at all, he had actually been secretly taking note of him--even if Wen Kexing had turned into ashes, the elegant Huashan Sect Leader would still remember that it was he, who had made him tumble so disgracefully in front of so many onlookers. If he didn't get revenge for this, Yu Qiufeng felt that he was disgracing his own identity as a man--of course, this was pure overthinking on Sect Leader Yu's part, because even if he had gotten revenge, not even a fool on this earth would treat him as a man.

Wen Kexing slapped his palm on the wall and bent backwards, near horizontally, to dodge the blow. Determined, Yu Qiufeng's sword arrived yet again in a flurry of strokes, each more vicious than the last. Wen Kexing was even more baffled. That day, he had really downed a lot of wine, and had been completely sloshed, unable to recall what year or day it had been; he had long forgotten about that "trivial misunderstanding" with Sect Leader Yu, and even if he had remembered, he would probably not think much of it--Yu Qiufeng wasn't a prissy young maiden that needed to preserve her own beauty and face. If he tumbled, so be it, what was the big deal?

So he had entirely no clue how he, an "innocent" passer-by, had offended this Sect Leader Yu. Looking at his opponent's attacks, it was as if he had snatched his wife--Wen Kexing felt very wronged, because men, in general, did not have male wives.

He didn't retaliate, retreating without rest, saying, "Say, what do you mean by this?"

Yu Qiufeng gave a cold chuckle. "Those of unorthodox paths are of abominable evil. The masses demand for them to be clobbered, it is fruitless to explain this, die!"

Wen Kexing tilted his face to the side, avoiding the single thrust, and stuck out two fingers with accuracy, trapping Yu Qiufeng's sword in between them. He scoffed, "Demand for them to be clobbered? My apologies, I'm not a rat, and I'm begging you to do this kind deed--don't come after me bearing deep grudges like you're rat poison!"

He made a soft noise of exertion, and Yu Qiufeng's sword snapped in his hand.

In the pugilist world, among the greatest ways one could humiliate someone else, shattering someone's weapon ranked right behind killing someone's father and snatching their wife.

Yu Qiufeng's eyes reddened. He drove a palm towards Wen Kexing's chest right as he leapt to send a kick flying at his crotch, his movements swift like he had honed

each strike through intense practice. Thankfully, after Huang Daoren had “rolled” away, the crowd behind him that seemed to be enjoying the show finally realised that they should be eradicating evil and went to pester Zhou Zishu--no one noticed that in this overlooked corner, the Huashan Sect Leader was putting up a performance of the “Teasing Yin Kick” in front of the crowd!

Mm, strange events occurred every year, but there were particularly many of them this year!

Leaning sideways, Wen Kexing raised his knee and landed it right on Yu Qiufeng’s thigh. Instantly, a crack could be heard as the bone fractured.

Simultaneously, his palm collided head-on with his; Yu Qiufeng only felt a torrential wave of internal energy surging at him with the palm, but it was already too late. His own palm seemed to be pulled towards his opponent’s, that mighty tsunami-like wave of internal energy flooding his nerves and blood vessels, almost gorging him to a bursting point.

In that instant, Yu Qiufeng raised his eyes in panic and glimpsed the expression of this cheeky, flippant man--dark and aloof, entirely uncaring, like a true demon that slaughtered countless without the slightest flicker in demeanour.

With a woman’s sharp scream, a biting gust of wind swept past, bringing a few needles as thin as ox hair hurtling towards Wen Kexing. Almost reflexively, he let go of Yu Qiufeng and slammed a palm towards them—from a distance away,¹⁰⁶ the needles were knocked askew, but the force of his palm still did not disperse. Unable to dodge in time, the force of his palm strike hit the woman behind straight in the chest, sending her flying and crashing into the wall.

It was only at this moment that Wen Kexing could clearly make out that the person who ambushed him was none other than Liu Qianqiao, who had unclogged her acupuncture points without anyone knowing. He was first taken aback, then, like he suddenly understood something, he called, “A-Xu, come quick, I witnessed some adultery!”

Zhou Zishu didn’t know what to say to him. Turning around, he booted a persistent death-seeker away, bent to pick up Liu Qianqiao, and said, clipped, “Cut the nonsense out, let’s go!”

Wen Kexing made a sound of acknowledgement, and escaped with Zhou Zishu without protest.

¹⁰⁶ 隔空: In wuxia, martial arts practitioners can expel qi to hit things. Kind of like the Force, but only to cause impact, unable to pull/choke/create lightning.

The two of them leapt away at great speed with qinggong, and after an indeterminable distance, long after they had already lost the lowlife troublemakers on their trail, Zhou Zishu finally stopped, threw the barely-alive Liu Qianqiao under a tree, and sealed a few of her major acupuncture points.

Wen Kexing crossed his arms, chuckling, “Great, you took her away, now your reputation as an unorthodox villain is further cemented.” He thought about it, then reflected smugly, “That’s fine, anyway, I don’t have any good reputation either. You’re mine, so this counts as sticking together for better or for worse.”

Zhou Zishu didn’t even look at him, bending to examine Liu Qianqiao’s condition. He took a small bottle of medicine out of his robes and stuffed a pill into her mouth without a second thought, regardless of whether it would work,¹⁰⁷ and said, “Lao¹⁰⁸ Wen, the mouth is meant for eating, not for talking crap--just a fraction of force more, and you’d have killed her on the spot.”

Hearing that slightly annoyed, but inexplicably familiar address of “Lao Wen”, Wen Kexing was instantly overjoyed. As for the words that followed, he automatically assumed that they were just demonstrating his tough love.

Liu Qianqiao coughed once; this light movement nearly caused her to fall apart. She glared at Zhou Zishu with angry eyes, speaking with much effort, "Why...are you pretending at kindness?"

Zhou Zishu ignored her words, squatting down to ask, “Let me ask you, where did you learn your skills of disguise from?”

Liu Qianqiao did not expect this to be the first question out of his mouth; she paused, then spat, and said gutsily despite being near-death, “What’s it got to do with you?”

Hearing this, Wen Kexing said, “Miss Liu, were you changing your appearance and snatching the Lapis Armour all for Yu Qiufeng? Let me give you a word of advice, then: a woman doesn’t have to be afraid of being ugly or stupid, but should be more fearful of being blind. That kind of trash, it’s a disservice to you to have fallen for him. Do you know how Yu Qiufeng found us? Why Ye Baiyi would have chased a man in black into that alley? Who was it that misled you on purpose, making you think that the escaped man in black was Yu Qiufeng, so that you would strike out at Ye Baiyi? Who exposed your identity in front of everyone? He was using you as a human shield, silly.”

¹⁰⁷ 死马当成活马医: Healing a dead horse as you would a live one – desperate, you resort to any methods that might have the slightest chance of working

¹⁰⁸ 老温: Old Wen, but it’s more of an intimate address between friends who’ve known each other for a very long time if neither party is past middle age/old

With his words, he ripped apart the “maidenly troubles” of this woman no longer in the prime of her youth. This was more fatal than Ye Baiyi’s “ugly freak” had been; had Liu Qianqiao possessed the slightest bit of energy to move, she would have crawled to her feet and bitten him dead.

Zhou Zishu said, “Shut up.”

Receiving the order, Wen Kexing immediately shut his mouth tight, like he was wishing that he’d grown only a single lip.

Staring at her face, Zhou Zishu estimated Liu Qianqiao’s age, and suddenly asked, “You...when you were little, did you meet an odd man who didn’t have eyebrows, who was injured and starving to death? And you gave him food?”

In his shifu Qin Huaizhang's youth, he had once taken refuge in a farmhouse after being severely wounded by the enemies hunting him down. Penniless, it was all thanks to a little girl with a scarred face who had secretly brought him food that he could survive the worst of it. With nothing on him to repay her with, and feeling much pity for her upon seeing her disfigurement, Qin Huaizhang had taught her a few techniques of disguise. Yet, he had never thought that it would harm her in the future instead.

Liu Qianqiao didn’t say anything, but upon hearing these words, a brief look of surprise flitted quickly across her face. Zhou Zishu understood, lowered his head to think, and drew a bottle of the wound ointment out of his robes. He set it in front of Liu Qianqiao and said, “Decide what’s best for yourself, from now on.”

Then he rose and left.

Elated, Wen Kexing followed after Zhou Zishu, saying, “She was plotting to do you in, yet, you were still so good to her, that’s really...”

But he suddenly stopped speaking, because he saw Zhou Zishu fish another bottle of ointment out from his robes as he walked, rubbing its contents onto his own face. It wasn’t obvious at first, but after a few more rubs, a different skin colour was gradually revealed.

Wen Kexing’s eyes weren’t even blinking, widening further as he stared--

Chapter 38 - Deadlock

¹⁰⁹ Gradually, the waxy yellowish-green colour of his skin was washed off. His lower jaw looked as though a layer of meat had been shorn away as he peeled off something that Wen Kexing had never seen before, and the bony, sharp-cut profile as if it had been chiselled by a knife was revealed.

Wen Kexing held his breath unconsciously, watching his deft fingers remove the disguise on his face--

Unlike the young master in Luoyang City who had a smiling face as pretty as a flower, or the popular, powdered beauty of the brothel upstairs in Dongting, this was a man's face, where there was no colour but black and white--pale and gaunt cheeks, lips as thin as a line and bloodless, the hollows beneath his brow very deep, his thick eyelashes half-covering his weighty, startling eyes, eyes like thick, rich ink.

Yes, in that instant, Wen Kexing could only think of such a description--thick, rich ink. In those eyes there seemed to be a coalesced black that would not diffuse; only when the angle changed, did a barely-there, reserved lustre flow over them.

He suddenly discovered that even if the other person had kept his disguise on for a lifetime, in his own mind, he was always envisioning that Zhou Zishu should look like this. Seeing now that he was indeed identical to what he had imagined, it was like...he had known him for a very, very long time.

Wen Kexing swallowed involuntarily, opening his mouth to say, "A-Xu..."

Zhou Zishu made a distracted "mn" of acknowledgement, wiping away the last remaining bit of the disguise on his face. After wearing this thing for so long, he had almost thought of it as his own face, and wiping it all off so suddenly threw him off a little instead. Originally, he had intended to live with this face, but who would have known that this thing called trouble would follow him like a shadow? Did this mean that he would have to change masks every two to three days from now on?

He was instantly in a bad mood again.

Wetting his lips, Wen Kexing murmured, "Have...I ever mentioned that I actually like men?"

Zhou Zishu looked at him briefly with an expression that conveyed "bullshit, do you really think I don't know that", then, as if he had thought of something, fished a

¹⁰⁹ More accurately, the title translates to "killing by ko". Ko describes a situation in Go where both the black stones and white stones are surrounding each other and a stone has to be removed from each side turn after turn, slowly depleting both parties. This impasse has to be resolved by an external rule.

human skin mask out of his robes and lobbed it at Wen Kexing, instructing, “If you don’t want to keep running into trouble, put it on.”

That human skin mask was of great craftsmanship, and if this had been any other time, Wen Kexing would still have examined it with great interest. Now, however, he didn’t even glance at it, only stared insistently at Zhou Zishu, his tone severe and serious as he said, “Is this your attempt at seducing me?”

Having lived for so long, Zhou Zishu perceived himself as a man through and through, from head to toe, and had never experienced another man flirting with him with such a lecherous gaze and serious tone. He was of the constant opinion that if Wen Kexing had no problem with his eyesight, then it must be a problem with his heart¹¹⁰-either it was missing a couple holes, or that it was far too open. Otherwise, why would he forgo pestering those pretty lasses and lads milling about on the streets, in favour of badgering him specifically to disgust him for his own entertainment?

Thus he ignored him, extracting another human skin mask to put on as he kept walking.

Witnessing the transformation of a handsome man into a shifty-looking, slant-eyed middle-aged man like the great shift of heaven and earth,¹¹¹ Wen Kexing felt his innards somersault with it, and desperately yearned to dunk his face in water and rinse his eyes clean. The sight in front of him was catastrophically tragic, and he cried, “It hurts the eyes too much, swap it for another!”

As he spoke, he reached a hand out to do it for him, helping him to tear it off.

Thinking that he was making a fuss on purpose, Zhou Zishu tilted his face to the side and avoided his hand. But Wen Kexing, stubborn, chased after him persistently—and so under the condition of the external threat temporarily removed, the two who had just been united against external forces resumed their internal strife, and began to trade blows there and then.

¹¹⁰ 心眼 actually refers to the ability to intuit and understand implicit insinuations, but the whole sentence plays on the word “heart”. Missing a few holes refers to the concept of 心窍, where an open hole means being enlightened about something—if Wen Kexing is missing a couple holes, it means that he’s too mentally underdeveloped to know what he’s doing.

¹¹¹ 乾坤大挪移: A martial art technique from wuxia novel *The Heavenly Sword and Dragon Slaying Sabre* by Jin Yong, where the user can activate latent potential residing in them in a moment of crisis. Operating on the basis of “even the meekest and weakest can become the most ferocious beast”, it’s also used to describe a complete shift in traits/manner.

Zhou Zishu sent a fist hurtling towards Wen Kexing's clavicle, yet Wen Kexing did not duck or dodge it. Not intending to actually cripple him, Zhou Zishu abruptly shifted his fist two inches upwards, grazing Wen Kexing's shoulder, but Wen Kexing took the opportunity to grab his arm and say with a wide smile, "Hey, let's discuss something. I see that you're also single, so how about the two of us make do with each other?"

When he spoke, he always had that cheeky grin: his eyes curved, as if he was purposely preventing others from reading the look in his eyes, or as if he was purposely preventing others from knowing if he truly meant it or not. Thus Zhou Zishu asked, annoyed, "What would I want you for?"

Wen Kexing came close to him, raised Zhou Zishu's hand to the height of his own jaw, and gently grazed his hand with the point of his chin. Then he waited for Zhou Zishu to snatch his hand away, as goosebumps rose all over his body, to pluck the mask off Zhou Zishu's face and toss it to one side, lowering his voice to ask, "What do you think?"

Zhou Zishu rolled his eyes and looked expressionlessly at Wen Kexing for a moment before he started to laugh. The pale regions of his face were far too pale, the striking regions too deep, always giving off an impression of cold-heartedness. It was only when he laughed that his brow relaxed, lines appeared by the corners of his mouth, and faint colour surfaced on his pale lips; for some unknown reason, he came off as slightly adorable. Following suit, this adorable man lowered his voice as well, asking him in reply with a pause after each word, "Keep you, so that I can slaughter you for meat when a famine hits?"

When his low voice like a murmur sounded by his ear, Wen Kexing's hair stood on its ends; even before he could finely savour what Zhou Zishu had said, he suffered a hard kick, his weakened knee nearly pitching him face-first onto the ground. Zhou Zishu strode away from him, fishing another human skin mask to put on--this one, uglier than the previous, was unsightly enough to anger the heavens.

He swaggered away smugly.

While these two old masters left carefreely to flirt with each other, Zhang Chengling was sitting on the steps alone, contemplating life. He did not know what had happened; when he had finally returned to his senses, Gu Xiang had grabbed him and tossed him to the side. Immediately afterwards, warm blood splashed his face, and screams exploded all around him. On Gu Xiang's pretty face was a murderous expression, the dagger in her hand dripping blood. By her feet was the hand of the black-clothed musician who had been walking around playing her instrument...and the two halves of a small, brightly-patterned, venomous snake.

With a ghastly pale face, the musician leapt out of the window and fled. Knowing that it was no longer safe to stay in this place for long, Gu Xiang hauled Zhang Chengling up and told Cao Weining, "Go, let's get out of here!"

Just as she finished speaking, about ten black-clothed men emerged out of nowhere, each one of them armed with a hook--the second suicide squad of the Poisonous Scorpions had arrived!

Everyone in the tavern, including the waiter, retreated before the situation took a turn for the worse, their meals unpaid for in their haste. Cao Weining asked in a single breath, "What's going on? Why did these people suddenly appear? What are they going to do?"

Gripping her dagger in hand, Gu Xiang slowly surveyed the Poisonous Scorpions. Feeling her palms sweat a little, she flipped her dagger around in a slight arc, internally bemoaning the situation. They had run into the Poisonous Scorpions suicide squad now, out of all possible times; it was easy to kill their way out, but what if something bad happened to this little tyke while she was babysitting him? With her master's style of doing things, wouldn't he skin her alive?

The Poisonous Scorpions seemed to be cautious of Gu Xiang as well, slowly closing from all directions. Out of the corner of her eye, Gu Xiang spotted Cao Weining, his expression dazed, and Zhang Chengling, who visibly had no fighting ability, and felt hopelessly close to death. This was the most unfortunate moment of her whole life.

So she told Cao Weining simply, "Did you forget? The suicide warriors of the Poisonous Scorpions want to kill the little tyke."

Cao Weining said "Ah," as he recalled that the few dead people at the Gao Family Manor were dressed like this, and instantly raised his guard. Brandishing his sword, he instructed Zhang Chengling, "Don't leave my side."

Gu Xiang's fine brows knitted. Deciding to strike first to better control the situation, she gathered a bunch of concealed weapons in her hand, and cast them out like they cost her nothing. The skirmish began--

Zhou Zishu suspected that Gu Xiang was "Purple Danger of the Ghost Valley"; this maiden was young, but had many tactics, and her martial ability was undoubtedly strong. Although Cao Weining's talent in poetry and songs made one's balls ache a little, he was, after all, the most outstanding disciple of this Qingfeng Sword Sect generation, and had never compromised on gongfu training just because he skimped on reading. Teaming up, their combined prowess was indeed out of the ordinary; even if the opponents were the suicide warriors from the Poisonous Scorpions, they could still put up a fight giving it their all.

Yet they were doomed, because they still had to protect a little deadweight named Zhang Chengling.

In her whole life, Gu Xiang had never had such a handicap while committing murder—occupied by a suicide warrior, Cao Weining, with his guard down, let another warrior circle past him and pounce at Zhang Chengling. Under duress, Cao Weining grabbed Zhang Chengling and flung him at Gu Xiang. With an “aiyo”, Gu Xiang caught him, but that was still a person that weighed about a hundred and ten pounds regardless; the momentum knocked her three, four steps askew, and it took her some effort to steady herself. At the same time, she stabbed to death a Poisonous Scorpion who had nearly caught her hair on his hook, and a concealed weapon sprung out from the tip of her shoe into the stomach of another Poisonous Scorpion. The latter didn’t die instantly, still persistent; with another supplementary stab from her, he finally went to meet the god of death.

The glare of the blades and the flash of swords whizzed over Zhang Chengling’s head and past his ears; every once in a while, he would suspect that some body part of his had been sliced off, and had to extend a hand to feel if it was still there, and then he had to suffer Gu Xiang and Cao Weining throwing him around like a gunny sack. Whirling through the air, he was dizzy beyond measure.

By the time there was a temporary halt to the chaotic skirmish, the hem of Gu Xiang’s trousers had already been dyed red by the blood of her opponents, and she had taken a hook to the waist. Fortunately, she had dodged quickly enough, otherwise the little beauty would have become two halves of a little beauty. Her pretty face had lost all colour, and Cao Weining, extremely dishevelled, was no better off.

It was as if they were the only three living creatures left in this place.

Gu Xiang ordered decisively, “Leave now! Otherwise there’ll be more trouble, quick!”

Cao Weining and Zhang Chengling looked at each other. Though the trouble had passed, they shuddered to think of what they had just experienced, and made to leave with her. At this moment, a moan came from the corner of the wall; Zhang Chengling turned his head to see that old beggar crawling out of the pile of corpses, who had nearly pissed his pants from fright. The chipped bowl containing the copper coins crashed to the floor, the coins scattering, soaking in blood. The old beggar could not even stand, his voice changed in pitch as he croaked, trembling, “M-murder!”

Cao Weining was, after all, from an influential, orthodox sect, and had been educated in the four cardinal virtues since he was a child. At present, he frowned, feeling that it was terrible of them to have caused this elderly person trouble due to their moment of negligence. So he went up to ask, “Senior, are you injured?”

That old beggar raised his head to look at him with unfocused eyes. Half a beat later, he uttered, “Ah...”, as if his words had been frightened out of him.

Zhang Chengling walked up to him as well, saying in a soft voice, “Grandpa, you should run away quickly, the bad guys are coming soon.”

He had just given the old beggar a copper coin, and the other still recognised him now, uttering “Aiyo, aiyo, somebody’s died!” as he grabbed Zhang Chengling’s elbow. Watching coldly off to one side, Gu Xiang’s gaze suddenly hardened, and like lightning, she leapt over, her dagger falling to hack at the old beggar’s arm.

Aghast, Cao Weining shouted, “A-Xiang, no!”

But it was too late. The dagger in Gu Xiang’s hand drove towards that old man with explosive power; as if he was frightened, the old man retracted his hand. He was quick enough, but Gu Xiang didn’t spare him this chance, abruptly changing moves—sending her dagger upwards in a backhand, she plunged it into his neck, stabbing through his aorta, blood spurting two feet high.

Cao Weining and Zhang Chengling stared wide-eyed at this blood-drenched girl, a living Asura, in shock, completely dumbfounded.

Expressionless, Gu Xiang yanked the dagger out from that old man’s corpse, and casually raised a sleeve to wipe at the blood on her face. Lifting her gaze, she saw the slightly fearful, horrified, even inscrutable expressions on the faces of those two people, and asked, “What?”

Cao Weining pointed at the old man’s corpse, his tongue in knots as he stammered, “He...he was only...only an old beggar, you...you killed him...”

Hmph, influential orthodox sects—the look in Gu Xiang’s eyes grew chilly in an instant. Without explaining herself, she turned to sheath her dagger, picked Zhang Chengling up and left.

Yet, Cao Weining cautiously caught up with her. Half a beat later, he mumbled, fumbling with his words, “I didn’t mean it like that...A-Xiang, I’m not saying that you are wrong, I don’t...I also don’t think that you kill at random, it’s just that what if you’re wrong, what if he’s an ordinary old beggar, what if...you realised these in the future? I’m worried that you’ll feel troubled over this.”

Gu Xiang paused in her steps almost imperceptibly. She was silent for a while, before saying brusquely, “Bullshit, what do I have to be sad about?”

Cao Weining sighed lightly, saying, “It’s always upsetting, it’s just that you aren’t aware of it yourself...sigh, let’s leave quickly, we don’t know where Zhou-xiong and

Wen-xiong went, and if another bunch of Poisonous Scorpions arrive, it'll be others who'll have to feel sad for us!"

Gu Xiang pouted and remained silent, thinking, This Cao Weining...even though he's a little bit of a simpleton, he's actually a decent person.

Chapter 39 - Escaping Danger

By the time Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing had hurried back, Gu Xiang and the others were no longer there. All that was left was a mess of corpses across the floor, which people from the Gao Family Manor were cleaning up. Surrounding them was a big ring of curious onlookers. Wen Kexing was still very unused to having something covering his face, constantly expecting the mask as thin as a cicada's wing to drop at any moment. Then he witnessed Zhou Zishu, who had people hunting him down just moments earlier, swagger over as if he was not involved in the situation at all...as if he was not Zhou Zishu.

For the first time, Wen Kexing realised that it was possible for a person to be this outrageously brazen while harbouring a guilty conscience; indeed, Zhou Zishu's face had become thicker after sticking another layer over it. Wen Kexing followed after him, clicking his tongue in amazement. A few people were examining the corpses on the floor. Mo Huaikong from the Qingfeng Sword Sect was amongst them, his expression grim, having obviously recognised Cao Weining's work. Wen Kexing sized him up for a moment, then went close to Zhou Zishu to murmur by his ear, "Look at the expression of that old fart surnamed Mo, Cao Weining can't have eloped with Gu Xiang, can he?"

Zhou Zishu said, "You're too dirty-minded."

He gazed at the corpses on the floor, his brows knitting, and had a slight premonition of doom. What kind of people were the suicide warriors of the Poisonous Scorpions? Could those two unreliable ones handle the situation, while bringing a half-grown child along with them? Were they dead or alive now? And where had they run to?

Wen Kexing thought about it, and said, "Now that whatever it is about the Lapis Armour and Poisonous Scorpions has incited a storm to brew within the city, if it were Gu Xiang, that silly lass, she should be running to somewhere isolated."

Zhou Zishu glanced at him and speedily retreated out of the crowd, saying. "What are you waiting for, then? Find her."

The two of them vanished as quickly as they had come, unnoticed by most. Wen Kexing reassured him, "There's no harm, that lass Gu Xiang isn't as useless as you think. Additionally, there's still Cao Weining."

Zhou Zishu glanced at him, frowning, and asked suddenly, "Why is Valley Master Wen so concerned about whether that little tyke lives or dies?"

Wen Kexing smiled, but once his mouth curved, he felt the mask on his face wrinkle a little and threaten to fall off. By hastily reaching up to press it in place, he started to appear strange to the onlooker. In reply, he asked, "Why, then, is Lord Zhou

so concerned about whether that little tyke lives or dies?”

Zhou Zishu said, “He is my disciple.”

Wen Kexing continued, “Your disciple is my disciple, between the two of us, who’s following who?”

Zhou Zishu said, “...Between the two of us, you’re following me—cut the nonsense out, are you aiming to gain some information from that little tyke?”

“Give me a kiss and I’ll tell you.” Wen Kexing leered at him. Unfortunately, the human skin mask on his face was too unseemly to be human; what he thought to be a flirtatious, charismatic gaze he was shooting at Zhou Zishu was truly bone-chilling.

Zhou Zishu snapped his head around silently, repulsed. Feeling that he brought this upon himself, he asked, “Are you not afraid that you’ll grow sores?”

Wen Kexing replied shamelessly, “I’ll be completely satisfied even if they become infected.”

Zhou Zishu ignored him once again, pondered for a moment, then said, direct, “Looking at the origins of Rong Xuan and the Ghost Valley, the place where the five major clans retrieved the Lapis Armour from should be within the Ghost Valley. With news of the Lapis Armour leaking this time round, no jianghu person would miss out on clamouring for this opportunity. Don’t tell me that some Ghost was mortally tempted, and left the Valley of his own accord? Don’t tell me that he coincidentally has something to do with the extermination of the Zhang family...don’t tell me that you feel the same way as the Delighted Mourning Ghost, that Zhang Chengling ‘coincidentally managed’ to see that audacious Ghost?”

Wen Kexing paused, then asked, “You tell me, then; if he doesn’t know, who else can I ask?”

Zhou Zishu turned back abruptly to look at him, asking, “Unless there are some other grave going-ons in the background that have even startled the Master of the Ghost Valley, who lives deep in obscurity and rarely ventures out?”

Wen Kexing did not say anything. He merely extended a finger, a cheeky smile on his face, and pointed at his own lips, looking at Zhou Zishu very expectantly.

Zhou Zishu pretended that he had not seen anything, contemplated for a while, and asked, “If you do find this person, what will you do?”

Lightly, with a hint of a smile, Wen Kexing said, “Flay him, strip his tendons from him, and subject him to a million cuts.” Seeing Zhou Zishu look at him with a

complicated expression, Wen Kexing laughed again, and said in a manner that made one's fists itch to punch him, "—I'm just saying it to scare you."

Zhou Zishu chuckled drily. "Aiyo, I'm really terrified."

This slippery old fox, Wen Kexing thought.

This bluffing bastard, Zhou Zishu thought.

The two of them shot each other a twisted smile that did not reflect their true feelings at all, and then continued to hurry on their way to collect those three while they were still breathing.

At first, Gu Xiang did not run towards anywhere isolated as Wen Kexing had predicted; after all, it was easier to murder someone where there were few people. The group of three haphazardly wiped at the blood on themselves and ran towards the bustling market, but, clustered together, they made too obvious a target. Before thirty minutes were even up, Gu Xiang regretted this decision.

They were stopped by a few people: the leader was Feng Xiaofeng and the Gaoshan slave, while following behind them was an old man and old lady. One leaned on a walking stick in their left hand, the other on one in their right; the old man was dressed in spring onion green, the old lady in peach red. The old man was draped in gold and silver, with about ten pounds of golden accessories on him. The old lady caked herself in makeup, her face shining like a monkey's bottom.

Cao Weining's palms started to sweat—this old couple was trickier to shake off than Feng Xiaofeng. They were none other than the legendary "Peach Red Grandma" and "Green Willow Grandpa", an old but crooked couple—even though they were getting on in age, they could do the most unscrupulous things without shame.

Feng Xiaofeng screeched with laughter. "Zhang Chengling, you are, after all, still a descendant of an orthodox sect. All the heroes of the world are coming up with a plan to make sure justice is served to your Zhang family, but here you are, running away with unorthodox villains of unknown origins. Are you trying to revive your dead father by infuriating him?"

Zhang Chengling's expression changed immediately. He was not adept at debating with people and had always been awkward with his words, so he simply shouted, "You...you're talking nonsense, my shifu and Senior Wen are good people!"

The Poisonous Scorpion's hook had opened a still-bleeding gash on the side of Gu Xiang's waist. Even though she had taken the antidote, the pain made her gush buckets of cold sweat. She had run out of patience a long time ago, and spat, "Why are you still talking bullshit? Feng Xiaofeng, make way for this madam, don't think I can't cut you down just because you're short!"

Feng Xiaofeng screeched, “Where did this damned insolent lass come from!” Brandishing a machete from behind his back, he pounced towards Gu Xiang. Cao Weining scrambled to unsheathe his long sword to block his blade, still trying to talk reason into him, saying, “Senior, A-Xiang is of a younger generation. If word gets out that you take what she says to heart, won’t that be detrimental to your mighty reputation?”

Feng Xiaofeng had focused all his attention on Zhang Chengling at first, and only noticed Cao Weining now. Momentarily taken aback, he asked curiously, “How did you, a little kid from the Qingfeng Sword Sect get mixed up with them?”

Cao Weining smiled ruefully. “Senior, I think there’s been some misunderstanding...”

Feng Xiaofeng hmphed and lifted his machete in hand, only for Peach Red Grandma behind him to interrupt, “Since things are so, Lao Feng, you should hold your horses—little Qingfeng Sword Sect kid, you found this little tyke and brought him back, this is very good, and is considered a good deed. This old granny thinks that you have a bright future ahead of you.”

Cao Weining had to raise his guard without alerting them at the same time as he was preventing Gu Xiang from making the situation worse. The cold sweat on his forehead nearly dripped down. He could only say, “Yes, many thanks to Senior...”

Peach Red Grandma waved her hand haughtily, and ordered with an arrogant tone, “Zhang Chengling, come with us.”

Hearing this, Zhang Chengling immediately retreated two steps, staring at her with wide, wary eyes. Cao Weining shifted half a step to the side to hide Zhang Chengling from their view, and prodded at their intentions by asking, “Is Senior helping Hero Zhao or Hero Gao to find Chengling? It’s better if we clear this up.”

Peach Red Grandma chuckled coldly, and interrogated him, her gaze fierce, “Kid, what reason do you have that makes you qualified to ask us that?”

Cao Weining blocked Zhang Chengling from view, retreating two steps, but still said with caution, “May these seniors forgive me, this one of a younger generation is simply helping someone else to take care of him, and doesn’t dare to hand this little brother to others so carelessly. Even if I have to hand him over, Hero Gao or Hero Zhao must be there...”

Green Willow Grandpa thumped the ground once with his walking cane, and hmphed coldly. “Do you think of yourself as someone great? This person, today, you will have to leave him behind; even if you don’t want to, you still will!”

He had barely finished speaking before he and Peach Red Grandma attacked at the same time. Waving his huge walking stick, he swung it downwards towards Cao Weining.

Cao Weining did not dare to leave it to chance, retreating a step but defiantly maintained his defensive position. Whipping his head around, he shouted at Gu Xiang, "Take him away first, hurry!"

Gu Xiang's mind whirled quickly. She knew that Cao Weining was still of the Qingfeng Sword Sect; regardless of the situation, these old freaks were still apprehensive of Mo Huaikong and Mo Huaiyang, and still had to show some mercy. Since they would not take his life, Gu Xiang did not hesitate, and said, "Take care."

She picked Zhang Chengling up and ran in the other direction.

How would Feng Xiaofeng be willing to let them go? He chased after them. Gu Xiang's gaze hardened. Her hands abruptly retracted back into her sleeves, and she shoved Zhang Chengling aside, dodged Feng Xiaofeng, and borrowed the momentum of the shove to leap at the Gaoshan slave. The meteor hammer of the Gaoshan Slave hurtled at her; Gu Xiang ducked away nimbly, jerked her hand up, and flung a handful of white powder. Unable to dodge in time, the Gaoshan slave was hit straight in the face. He started to howl in agony, unable to open his red and swollen eyes. He rubbed at them with his hands, but blood seeped out of them. Gu Xiang was vicious in her execution, incapacitating his eyes with a devious trick that no one had predicted.

Feng Xiaofeng spun around to face the Gaoshan slave, aghast as he asked, "A-Shan, what...what happened to you?"

Scratching vigorously at his own eyes, the Gaoshan slave only howled mournfully like a wild beast. Feng Xiaofeng sprung at him and hugged his arm, the two of them rolling around on the ground; only with immense effort, did he manage to seal the Gaoshan slave's acupuncture points. Feng Xiaofeng took one look at his eyes, and felt greatly agonised at the sight of that frightening state. He roared, "Don't you dare leave, you little slut!"

But where was there still trace of Gu Xiang and Zhang Chengling?

Gu Xiang had determined that crowded spaces were a no-go and ran towards the deserted outskirts with Zhang Chengling. She was burning with anxiety: one moment, her mind kept lingering on how her master and Zhou Xu were both unpredictable, could at least one out of the two find them? and another moment she was worrying that, since she was forced to use that move earlier, would Feng Xiaofeng take his fury out on Cao Weining? Had she doomed that silly boy to die?

But she did not have much time to worry about Cao Weining, because the third batch of Poisonous Scorpion suicide warriors were lying in wait in the woods they had to pass on the way to the outskirts.

Gu Xiang bemoaned the situation internally: she was injured and did not know how long she could hold out for, but there was not one person around whom she could turn to for help. She stuffed a dagger in Zhang Chengling's hands, and shoved him outwards with all her might, shouting, "Run!" Then she rose as nimbly as a sparrow, and braced herself to meet the suicide warriors head-on.

In his panic, Zhang Chengling did not think of where to run, and simply scrambled towards the woods. While running, his tears started to fall as he started to dwell on how useless he was, and how he always burdened others. First it was his shifu, then it was Cao-dage and Gu Xiang-jiejie... But reality did not give him the time to reminisce and regret; a few sharp whistles sounded by his ear, and three to four men in black popped into existence from different directions, blocking his path. Zhang Chengling stood there with a short dagger Gu Xiang had given him in hand, holding it like a child holding a toy.

The hooks in the hands of those black-clothed men glinted with a cold light. In the instant they closed in, Zhang Chengling's ferocity was suddenly provoked. He thought, why do you want me to die? What bad things have I done? Why can other people live, but not me?

A man in black accelerated, and the hook swept towards his chest like a giant scorpion. Zhang Chengling put his left foot forward, and somehow, he thought of the words Wen Kexing had said to him that night—as a mighty eagle ensnares a rabbit, as a bow drawn without regrets, weaken at the peak, but surge when suppressed—he suddenly whirled and jumped up, stepping on a tree trunk to borrow momentum for a great leap, and pounced with his whole body towards that cold light. In that instant, his mind was completely empty, save for four words: Fight to the death.

The short sword clashed with the scorpion's hook, the clang of metal jarring to the ear. Wen Kexing's voice rang by his ear once more: When permutations are superficial, the aura of your blade should be breezy, floating unsteadily; when boundless metamorphosis occurs, all possible variations are embodied within one. His blade was halted by the hook; putting all his might on the hand restrained by the hook, Zhang Chengling twisted and sent his hand forwards, forcefully driving the short sword into the black-clothed chest.

That Poisonous Scorpion died even before he could make a noise of pain. Zhang Chengling found it a little hard to believe; in an instant, joy, fear, aimlessness, and many other emotions surged in his heart, but even before he could savour them, another Poisonous Scorpion had appeared in front of him. Zhang Chengling raised a hand to block the strike, but discovered in horror that black was starting to creep from

where his palm had been nicked by the hook. Right after, his whole body weakened, and he wobbled. Unable to stand any longer, he collapsed to his knees.

Zhang Chengling closed his eyes in despair, thinking—was he going to die?

But that fatal blow did not land. Zhang Chengling waited for a long while, before he snuck a peek over, only to see an arrow planted in the centre of that Poisonous Scorpion's chest. Wide eyes nearly bursting out of his skull, the person toppled with a crash, and a man's voice rang from behind him, saying, "Murdering and committing arson in broad daylight, why do I not remember that the folk culture of Dongting has deteriorated thusly?"

Chapter 40 - Lord Seventh

Zhang Chengling felt woozy. The scorpion's venom was probably starting to take effect: it was like thunder was booming right by his ear, the noise all around him sounding like it was separated from him by a layer of gauze—he could hear it, but it felt somewhat unreal.

He turned his head in the direction where the arrow had come from, and saw two men.

The man with a small crossbow in his hand was dressed in navy blue robes, his long sleeves fluttering. A belt the width of a palm was fastened around his waist, and on the side of it, hung a white jade xiao. He did not look like someone of the jianghu, nor did he look like a scholar, but looked more like a noble who luxuriated in wealth. His hooded, amorous eyes¹¹² seemed as if they held a slight trace of laughter, but upon closer examination, the look he shot at the last Poisonous Scorpion contained the glint of a cold light.

Through the haze in his mind, Zhang Chengling thought that this person...was the best-looking person that he had ever seen.

There was another man following at his side. Dressed in black, that man had a face that came off as frosty-looking. A small ferret sat on his shoulder.

That suicide warrior seemed to hesitate momentarily, before hurtling like an arrow released towards the man holding the bow. Zhang Chengling only felt an indescribably sharp gust of wind whip past his ear, and before he could realise what had happened, that Poisonous Scorpion had become a dead scorpion. That man in black who had seemed to still be some distance away earlier was by his side in the blink of an eye. Bending down, he picked up Zhang Chengling's bleeding hand to peruse it, and reached out to seal a few of his acupuncture points. Stuffing a pill into Zhang Chengling's mouth, he said, "Swallow it. It is scorpion venom."

Zhang Chengling could not care about anything else. He tugged at the hem of the man's robes with great effort, saying, "Gu...Xiang...jie...please save..."

The sounds he had expended all of his energy to form blurred into one another once they reached his mouth, troubling the man in long robes next to him to pause for a moment. Yet, miraculously, the man still understood, and asked in a gentle voice, "You're asking us to help you save someone? Where are they?"

Zhang Chengling extended a finger, pointing in the direction he had come from, mumbling, "Gu...jiejie...save...her, save...save..."

¹¹² 桃花眼: "peach blossom eyes"

The man in black raised his head to glance at his companion. The man in long robes said, "Why aren't you going?"

The man in black plucked the ferret from his shoulder and threw it into his arms. "Take care. I will return immediately."

He was gone in a flash. Zhang Chengling fixed his eyes helplessly on where the man had vanished, his gaze nearly boring holes in earnest anxiety. That man in long robes helped him sit up and instructed, "Close your eyes, concentrate, don't let your imagination run wild. Safeguard your own life first, before worrying about other things."

Zhang Chengling knew that it was futile to worry any further, and so closed his eyes as instructed. That ferret wriggled out from that man's robes, curled up into a ball, and sniffed around on him. A faint stench of blood wafted in the air, and a whiff of fragrance clung onto the man's robes; it was amidst this kind of scent where Zhang Chengling gradually lost consciousness.

When he woke up, the sky was completely dark. The numbness had already faded with the scorpion venom, and it was only now that he got up sluggishly. For a moment, he was a little disoriented, unable to recall why he was in this state, until a young girl next to him exclaimed. "Ah, you're finally awake!"

Overjoyed, Zhang Chengling turned his head. Although Gu Xiang was a little dishevelled, she was still whole. The wound on her body had been given medical attention, and she was currently sitting by a fire pit for warmth. Right at this moment, a calloused hand reached over, fingers resting against Zhang Chengling's wrist as they took his pulse for a while, before releasing him. "The poison has cleared up."

The one who had taken his pulse was that man in black. He ignored Zhang Chengling looking curiously in his direction, simply nodded and stood ramrod-straight under the tree. When viewed from the side, his chiselled profile seemed like it was carved from stone. Zhang Chengling discovered that the gaze Gu Xiang directed at this man was full of respect and awe; it even felt like she was somewhat holding in check the raucous way of talking that she had been born with.

So he said awkwardly, "Many thanks...many thanks to these two heroes for saving us."

Hearing this, the man in black shook his head almost imperceptibly. "No need." And then he did not look at Zhang Chengling any longer, turning his head to look in the other direction.

Zhang Chengling followed the direction of his gaze and saw the man in long robes, who had been carrying that bow in the day, walking over to them with a bundle of firewood in his arms. Just as the man in black was about to stand, Gu Xiang had

already run over enthusiastically and was taking the firewood from him. “Lord Seventh, you should sit, you should sit. Leave these things to me, why are you doing manual labour personally? I’m someone else’s servant anyway...”

The hooded eyes of the “Lord Seventh” she spoke of curved in a smile as he heard this, and he let Gu Xiang take the firewood from him. He sat next to the man in black, who produced a small and delicate handwarmer from nowhere, stuffed it into his hands in a practiced movement, and nimbly plucked a dried leaf off his sleeve. It could have been Zhang Chengling’s imagination, but he felt that the man in black had turned from a lifeless block of stone into a person of flesh and blood in that instant. Even the look in his eyes had grown warm.

These two men did not converse much, but there was an inexplicable intimacy and tacit understanding of each other to their movements.

Lord Seventh looked at Zhang Chengling and asked, “Are you feeling better?”

His voice was not loud, but was extremely nice to listen to. Suddenly, without knowing why, Zhang Chengling blushed, lowering his head, and nodded silently. He could not help himself from peeking up again, wanting to take one more look at that man—that woman he had seen in the tavern the other day was extremely beautiful, but Zhang Chengling suddenly felt that compared to this man, the woman’s face was like a layer of skin made of paper: flimsy and purposefully fake.

Lord Seventh asked, “What is your surname? Those people...”

Before Zhang Chengling could react, Gu Xiang, who was adding firewood to the fire off to the side answered him loquaciously, “He’s my brother—naturally, his surname is Gu as well. The two of us were originally hired to do chores in our master’s house, I was a maid and he was a servant boy, but who would have known that calamity would befall our master’s house? We don’t know where they came from, but they want to hunt all of us servants down and kill us all no matter what. It’s highly immoral of them--if they ever have children in the future, their children won’t amount to anything. Many thanks to you two gentlemen...”

The man in black eyed her, and Gu Xiang could not bring herself to continue, her wide eyes drifting left and right.

She was speaking nonsense, but Lord Seventh did not point it out. He simply continued from where Gu Xiang had left off with a pleasant expression on his face. “Both of you are injured. We should have brought you to an inn, but this little maiden said that someone was hunting you down in the city, so it would not be safe. We would have to trouble you to spend a humble night here, and make plans tomorrow morning. Do you have anywhere else to turn to?”

His voice was gentle and mild, his words neither hurried nor slow, like he was trying to comfort two very young children. As Zhang Chengling listened to him, he suddenly felt very sorry for himself. He thought, where else could they go? His dad was long dead, his whole family exterminated, and good or bad regardless, everyone he bumped into wanted to kidnap him. He was like a startled bird that had flown until its wings were nearly at breaking point, but vast as the world was, he still could not find a place to land and rest. His eyes reddened, but he remained silent.

Instead, Gu Xiang thought about it, and said, "My master and this kid's shifu were originally going to meet up with us, but we didn't expect a bunch of people to suddenly emerge and hunt us down. We escaped without choosing any direction in particular, and we don't know if they are able to find us..."

Zhang Chengling thought of Cao Weining, and supplemented in what he thought was a smart addition, "And Cao-dage was taken away by a few strange people."

Gu Xiang immediately shot daggers with her gaze at him, warning the little idiot Zhang Chengling not to speak carelessly. Yet Zhang Chengling, who was preoccupied with his own sense of being set adrift and grief, did not take note of her gaze, but heard Lord Seventh pursue this line of questioning, "What kind of strange people?"

Zhang Chengling answered honestly, "A dwarf and a giant, and an old granny and grandpa dressed in flowery colours."

Gu Xiang rolled her eyes and looked up at the starry sky, wishing that she could knock Zhang Chengling into unconsciousness again.

Lord Seventh appeared to be unfamiliar with the pugilists. He paused, and asked, "Who are they?"

The man in black beside him said, "The Earth God Feng Xiaofeng and the Gaoshan slave, the ones in flowery colours...they probably ran into Peach Red Grandma and Green Willow Grandpa."

His gaze flashed towards Zhang Chengling like lightning, and he asked coldly, "Although they are shady characters, they have their own independent identities and will never work in tandem with the Poisonous Scorpions. Why are they hunting you down?"

Once his gaze swept over Zhang Chengling, Zhang Chengling felt like a frigid block of stone was pressing on his chest, and he choked on the spot.

Yet, Lord Seventh laughed, and said, "Little Venom, don't scare the kid." Hearing this, the man in black faithfully dropped his gaze and, like an ancient monk entering mediation, no longer paid any attention to Zhang Chengling and Gu Xiang.

Lord Seventh's gaze paused on an antsy Gu Xiang, before he turned to Zhang Chengling and suddenly asked, "Kid, let me ask you, does your shifu have the surname of Zhou?"

Gu Xiang was deeply afraid that Zhang Chengling would reveal other pieces of information, and answered hastily before he could, "You're wrong, his shifu doesn't have the surname 'Zhou', but is surnamed 'Tang'¹¹³, he's a sleazy and perverted old fart!"

"Yet, her pig-like comrade Zhang Chengling frowned at her, and said with a righteous air, "My shifu isn't some sleazy and perverted old fart, you're talking rubbish!"

Gu Xiang's ten fingers thrummed with the urge to strangle him dead.

Lord Seventh shook his head and laughed out loud. "Where did this mischievous and clever little maiden come from? That's enough, we are not bad men. Come to think of it, your Zhou-shifu is still a good friend of mine from the past."

Gu Xiang's pupils darted back and forth with an idea. "Say, then, what is his shifu called, and what does he look like?"

Lord Seventh said, "His shifu's surname is Zhou, and his name is..."

He suddenly paused, his hooded eyes narrowing as he pondered for a beat, thinking: Zhou Zishu, that person, was used to hiding behind partial truths. Surely he would not use his own name, so what would he call himself?

Lifting his gaze, he saw Gu Xiang's pair of wide eyes staring at him unblinkingly. He found it humorous that he had really been stumped by a little maiden's questions, but in a split second, a light went off in his mind, and the words leapt out of him. "He's called Zhou Xu, am I right? 'Body like a drifting cloud, heart like a floating willow seed', and he had a brother called Zhou Yun. As for how he looks like...I do not know how he looks like today, because he's accustomed to disguise. Although, ultimately, he makes no progress whatsoever: no matter how he disguises himself, he can't be anything other than a man with a yellowish-green face and sleazy features, right?"

He could not be sure whether Zhou Zishu would use the pseudonym of "Zhou Yun" or "Zhou Xu", but he thought that with the man's personality, he would only use those few names, and so he bluffed his way through with half-truths.

But he had actually stunned Gu Xiang with his words, who said, semi-believing, "Huh? Does Zhou Xu still have a brother?"

¹¹³ Gu Xiang actually says 'Porridge' (粥/zhou) and 'Soup' (汤/tang)

In the long period of time she had known Zhou Zishu for, even if she had heard Wen Kexing say that he might be among the top brass of Tian Chuang, she found him very mysterious. Where he had come from, from where he would leave,¹¹⁴ which sect had he been of and other details like that were all unknown to her, and she had never heard that he even had a brother.

Another thought flashed in her mind. The two people in front of her: it was difficult to tell for the man in blue, but the man in black was truly one of those experts that she had rarely come across in her life. Even if her master was present, it would be difficult to tell who was more skilled. If he wanted to harm her and Zhang Chengling, it was as easy as squashing two bugs dead. There was absolutely no need for him to lie, and so, in her heart, Gu Xiang truly believed them.

Lord Seventh saw that he had these two tykes stunned, and lowered his eyes. He watched the fire flickering unsteadily, and chuckled soundlessly.

And thus, on the second day, Gu Xiang brought Zhang Chengling along with her and left with these two men, carefully avoiding detection by others. Lord Seventh brought the two of them to a bank, where the shopkeeper and the boss who resembled a ball of dough behind him came out immediately to welcome them, respectfully addressing the two men as “Master” and “Great Shaman” respectively.

Lord Seventh settled them in, and brought cakes to share with the two of them. Sitting off to one side, he excitedly started a game of chess with the man in black, whittling away time like this. At noon, the boss of the bank came in suddenly, and said to Lord Seventh, “Master Zhou has been located, and has arrived.”

Lord Seventh threw the chess game aside and stood, rescinding his pale hands back into his sleeves as he smiled cheerily, instructing, “One of life’s four greatest blessings is to bump into an old friend in a land far away from home. Ping An, hurry and invite him in.”

¹¹⁴ ♪ ♪ Where did you come from, where did you go, Cotton-Eye Zhou ♪ ♪

Chapter 41 - Despair

Previously, when Zhou Zishu arrived at the Pingan Bank, he could always enter straight away. Today, however, after the shopkeeper had let him into the main hall, the shopkeeper first poured him and Wen Kexing, who was peering at his surroundings like a villager from the rural areas in the city, a cup of tea each. Next, he stood to the side, all smiles as he said, "Please wait for a little while more, Master Zhou. Lord Seventh is here today, and the boss has gone in to pass on news of your arrival."

Zhou Zishu's heart leapt, his emotions suddenly in a tentative jumble at being so close to meeting an old friend once more.

Yet, Wen Kexing heartlessly commented, "Hey, didn't they say that Gu Xiang and Zhang Chengling are here? Can't they just lead those two dumb kids out? What news do they have to pass on? It's like we entered a lord's manor."

Zhou Zishu remained silent, thinking that Wen Kexing was truly a person of divinity, for every guess he made to be correct.

After a short while, Pingan walked out at a brisk pace, and said, "Master Zhou, my master and the Great Shaman are waiting for you inside."

When Wen Kexing heard the two words "Great Shaman", he was stunned. He thought: could it really be that the impossibly mysterious great shaman of Nanjiang had arrived?

--This pugilist world of the Central Plains was really becoming more and more chaotic.

Before he could muse further upon it, Wen Kexing followed Zhou Zishu into the inner hall. Pushing open an aged wooden door, a courtyard in which a row of sweet osmanthus flowers were planted lay beyond; entering, they could catch a whiff of a faint fragrance. Pingan brought the two of them into a house. Once he pulled the curtain aside, the warm air within rushed out at them. Lifting his gaze to peer in, Wen Kexing discovered that apart from Gu Xiang and Zhang Chengling, there were two other men inside.

His gaze involuntarily drifted to meet with that of the man in black. In that instant, without prior agreement, the two men nodded to each other and shifted their gazes away, as a show of cession to each other out of courtesy.

Wen Kexing regarded the other man, guessing that this man was probably the "Lord Seventh" that the shopkeeper had mentioned. At first glance, he could not help but privately gasp. He reckoned that of all of the good-looking individuals in the world, he had seen a considerable number of them. Yet, none of them could compare

to this man--those eyes and brows came off as somewhat insouciant in their beauty, but were balanced by an air of affluence about him, thereby revealing only a little hint of that indefinable, loose charisma. It was like the idiom “a noble as outstanding as orchids and jade trees” had been thought up to describe him specifically.

The next moment, he heard Zhou Zishu call respectfully, "Lord Seventh, Great Shaman."

Smiling cheerily, Lord Seventh made to help him up and examined that face of his, sighing nostalgically, "After many years of not seeing you, Zishu, your tastes...are truly becoming something fewer and fewer people would dare agree with."

Zhou Zishu laughed and reached up a hand to wipe lightly at his face. Plucking the human skin mask off, he carried it in his arms and smiled wryly. "After so many years, other than young maidens, the only person I know who dares to 'hide behind' a beautiful face is that fool Jiuxiao."

That shidi who had died in the battle of the capital all those years ago, Liang Jiuxiao, was the regret of his lifetime. All along, Zhou Zishu had dared not mention him--after so long had passed, that scene was like a dream to him. But here, faced with an acquaintance from the past, he felt like he had returned to the capital of that ten-mile Moon-Gazing Riverbank.¹¹⁵ Those past acquaintances and past events flashed in succession before his eyes, and, astonishingly, he had spoken that person's name without a second thought.

In actual fact, it was nothing much to say it aloud. It merely felt like something had been cast out of his chest; like he was missing a piece of it, hollow.

Lord Seventh's smile froze. He sighed, looking Zhou Zishu over another time, and then frowned. "Why have you become this thin?"

Zhou Zishu shook his head, dropped his gaze and chuckled. "It is a long story. It is most probably that...I am growing old."

Wen Kexing was a person who lusted after men to begin with; upon entering, he had admired the man at first, opining that this "Lord Seventh" was truly peerless. Yet, at this moment, he was starting to grow dissatisfied. He considered how he had pestered and badgered Zhou Zishu for so long, and the fact that if it weren't for Yu Qiufeng and company giving them trouble, he might not even have had the chance to witness that person's true face up till now. This man, however, could make him wipe off his human skin mask within two to three sentences upon his arrival, and even knew his real name...

¹¹⁵ For those who don't have the context of Lord Seventh, this river runs through the capital and is the centre of glamour and celebration of the city.

Indignance rose within Wen Kexing.

Pingan invited the two of them to sit, and served them tea. Lord Seventh asked, “Has all been well...in the capital?”

Leaning against the backrest, Zhou Zishu seemed to have relaxed himself entirely, and spoke slowly, “There are those leaving on expedition as commanders, and there are those returning to the palace as premiers. The Young Marquis He Yunxing has married Princess Jingan. The couple are faraway in the Northwest, and can be said to have set their roots down over there. The Emperor...is quite well. A little prince has just been delivered to him this year, but I had to leave early, and couldn’t make it for the Third Prince’s full-moon feast.¹¹⁶”

Between the two of them, one asked and the other answered, their conversation neither hasty or slow. The Great Shaman did not interrupt, but merely sat to the side and listened silently. Smoke rose gently from the incense burner. It was as if time had slowed.

Wen Kexing sensed that there was an odd atmosphere between the two of them. He had never seen such a Zhou Zishu, who sat drinking tea and chatting quietly with a serene expression on his face, and felt that they were like old kindred souls who had not seen each other for many years. Though this reunion might have come out of the blue, joy did not show on their faces, and they talked about inane, dull things that could have done without being said. Yet, it was like they shared a silent, mutual understanding in their hearts.

He began to find this “Lord Seventh” unpleasant to the eye, thinking, where did this pretty boy pop up from? He keeps going by “Lord Seventh”, “Lord Seventh”, and doesn’t even dare to give us a name. He cannot be a decent fellow.

Thus, very unhappily, Wen Kexing ripped the human skin mask from his face, and beckoned at Gu Xiang and Zhang Chengling, who were staring, flabbergasted. “Get over here, you little tykes.”

At once, the gazes of the three people shifted onto him. The faint trace of nostalgia had not yet faded from Lord Seventh’s face, so he asked in passing, “And this is?”

Zhou Zishu hesitated slightly, then replied, “A...friend...from the jianghu....”

Before he could even finish his sentence, Wen Kexing quickly snatched Zhou Zishu’s hand from where it was resting on the small table and placed it over his own chest. Slanting his gaze at Zhou Zishu, he whined, “A friend from the jianghu? That’s

¹¹⁶ The Chinese traditionally celebrate a baby’s 满月, which marks a full month after the birth of the child.

not what you said to me previously, why, A-Xu, are you planning on abandoning me after you've toyed with me?"

In that instant, Lord Seventh's expression could be described as "stunned". Even the Great Shaman who had remained silent thus far beside him paused, his inky pupils darting back and forth between the two of them, before landing on the hand Wen Kexing was holding with a strange gaze.

Zhou Zishu freed his other hand, and skilfully flicked at the ulnar nerve¹¹⁷ at Wen Kexing's elbow, forcing him to let go. Then he calmly lifted the tea bowl, and as if nothing had happened, said, "He's called Wen Kexing. He is quite batty, and always speaks untrue nonsense. Lord Seventh, please do not take it amiss."

Lord Seventh was mute for a beat before he could not stand watching them any longer, and said, "Pingan, what are your eyes for? Hurry and top up Master Zhou's bowl."

Like he had just been startled from a dream, Zhou Zishu set down his empty tea bowl, and shot a venomous glare at Wen Kexing. Wen Kexing suffered it willingly, producing a dumb smile that made one's teeth itch with detestation.

With the intent to stir the pot, Lord Seventh sighed. "To think of the wealth and glamour of those years, now transformed so completely that I can no longer recognise them. Who knows what has become of the Moon-Gazing River, constructed upon heaps and heaps of rouge and powder, and all those magnificent and ornate buildings along it today? That year, during the crisis of the capital, you and I made an oath on the tower. If we lived to see long, leisurely days, we would not retire our cups before we were drunk. I have been waiting in Nanjiang for so long that the wine has grown cold, yet, an old friend does not even have the slightest intent to visit."

Subsequently, he shifted the topic, a mischievous light flashing in his amorous eyes as he deliberately mentioned, "Zishu, you have broken with our promise to meet, but I have not. Until now, I still remember that you asked me to procure you a slim-waisted Nanjiang girl, and I have taken note of many. I am not sure if you..."

The Great Shaman coughed lightly, traces of laughter appearing on his aloof face. Zhou Zishu felt that he could stay here no longer, and stood up to slap his palm over his fist in a sloppy salute, saying hastily, "Ah...what's that, Lord Seventh has just arrived in Dongting, and must be exhausted from travelling by carriage. We'll not intrude any longer..."

Lord Seventh said, "Actually, we aren't tired at all."

¹¹⁷ Commonly referred to as "funny bone".

Almost at the same time, Wen Kexing exclaimed, “What? A-Xu, you’ve even said something of this sort?”

The room descended into silence. The few of them stared at each other speechlessly, until Gu Xiang, who was more insensitive to the situation, suddenly patted Zhang Chengling, who was spacing out, on the head and lamented, “This is called ‘How well can you know another after a night of longing; be utterly ignorant as you sleep like the dead in spring’.¹¹⁸ Little Chengling, I think we, the two of us, should go rescue Cao-dage. Every one of them only cares about fighting for a lover’s attention, and isn’t reliable at all.”

Lord Seventh laughed. “This little maiden doesn’t have to worry. You said that Cao-dage of yours is from the Qingfeng Sword Sect, so those strange people will not dare to do anything to him. Instead, if you hurry there without sufficient preparations, you will be cementing his guilt, and do nothing but cause more trouble for him--Zishu, only so little time has passed, and you want to leave? Sit for a while longer. As the ancients frequently lament, “There is no company to share the beautiful days of youth with”, you and I have met again in a rare reunion, but have barely reminisced enough about the past to fill a cup to the brim. Why are you so eager to leave?”

Wen Kexing felt that this person spoke confusingly by using pretentious references from literary works and cobbling unrelated events together. He found him unreliable and increasingly unpleasant to the eye, and thought that the words “The genteel sophisticated accumulate great falsehoods, while the simple boorish accumulate great virtue” were indeed true: a person who talked a lot of nonsense indeed inspired his loathing, even if he was a beauty, or an absolute beauty. Tugging Zhou Zishu along, Wen Kexing said, “Yes, yes, yes, we won’t disturb your rest, we still have some matters to see to...”

However, the Great Shaman set down the chess piece he was fiddling with, as he shook his head and smiled. Rising to his feet, he said, “Manor Lord Zhou, I see that you are not in great spirits, and your countenance appears to be somewhat languishing. Could I take your pulse?”

Zhou Zishu hesitated, but Wen Kexing’s hand on him tightened abruptly.

The playful mischief on Lord Seventh’s face had vanished. He frowned, asking, “What is it?”

The Great Shaman said, “I will need to take a look before I can tell with accuracy. Though, forgive me for saying so directly, Manor Lord Zhou—looking at you now, you show signs of a person on their last legs. What, exactly, has happened?”

¹¹⁸ Gu Xiang, having learnt from Cao Weining, is bastardising idioms here.

Upon hearing this, Wen Kexing released Zhou Zishu slowly, his irreverent expression growing serious.

Out of the blue, Lord Seventh said, “Why, does Helian Yi refuse to spare even you?”

“Helian Yi” was the true name¹¹⁹ of the current Emperor, yet, he uttered it so nonchalantly. No one at present noticed this minute detail, though; all those in the know and outside of it were looking at Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu only chuckled lightly, stretching out his wrist to lay it flat in the Great Shaman’s hand. “Lord Seventh, what kind of place that is, and...what kind of person he is, shouldn’t you know more clearly than I do?”

The Great Shaman placed three fingers over Zhou Zishu’s pulse. His brow knitted more severely, and after a long while, he finally released Zhou Zishu. Gently, he sighed, and asked, “I have heard that Tian Chuang has a Three-Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupunctures...”

“Indeed.”

“You have nailed one into your body every three months, allowing them to grow into your body and letting your meridians wilt bit by bit, so that you would not lose your mind and can still retain a few levels of core strength. Am I correct?”

Lord Seventh’s eyelid twitched. Still, Zhou Zishu smiled, and said, “The Great Shaman has an observant eye.”

Yet, the Great Shaman ignored him, clasping his hands behind his back and pacing around the room slowly. Wen Kexing felt an abrupt sense of panic and opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Instead, it was Lord Seventh who helped him ask, “Wu Xi, do you have a solution?”

The Great Shaman did not speak for a long while; upon hearing this, he thought for some time, before shaking his head slowly. “If you had hammered in seven nails at the same time, although your mind might be disoriented, I might still have been able to come up with a solution to remove them. If you recuperated with great care afterwards, you will be able to recover some. But once the nails in your body are removed, the core strength you possess will undoubtedly flood your nearly-desiccated meridians and destroy them. By then, not even a god can save you...”

¹¹⁹ The term here is 名讳, which means something like “name taboo” – in ancient China, as a sign of respect, no other person can use the characters that are in his name; they would have to use another character, or leave out a few strokes. Much less speak it aloud directly, like what Lord Seventh is doing here.

Ye Baiyi had already said these words once; Zhou Zishu flapped a hand, indicating that he was unwilling to hear them a second time. Just now, when the Great Shaman had spoken, he still had a few slivers of hope, even if he did not make them known. Otherwise, he would not have presented his wrist.

He, too, did not know when it had begun--maybe it was because of these few noisy people by his side, or maybe it was because he had been dragged into those troublesome affairs, that he had begun to be sentimentally attached to this mortal dust.

Upon hearing the Great Shaman say this now, a few smidgens of gloom rose in his heart. With effort, he chuckled and said, "You should have told me this earlier. If I had known that the Great Shaman has such divine knowledge that he even knows how to remove the Three-Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupunctures, I would definitely have told Tian Chuang to switch to a more foolproof method, so that not even one person could escape our net."

The Great Shaman looked at him. Still thinking deeply about a solution, he did not answer. So Zhou Zishu nodded to Lord Seventh and said, "We'll take our leave first, and come visit another day."

They had just walked to the door, when they heard the Great Shaman suddenly utter, "Hold on, or..."

Before Zhou Zishu could react, Wen Kexing had already taken hold of him. His hand was like metal clamped around Zhou Zishu's wrist, pinning him steadfast in place. Turning his head, he said in a polite and proper tone that was rare of him, "What did the Great Shaman think of?"

The Great Shaman hesitated for a moment, then said, "Manor Lord Zhou, if...if you incapacitate yourself by ridding yourself of your martial ability, I may have a fifth of confidence that I can save your..."

Yet, when Zhou Zishu had heard the words "ridding yourself of your martial ability", a smile surfaced on his pale face. It was difficult to tell what emotion was behind it. He lifted a hand to cut him off, and gently replied, "What else do I have left, if I rid this body of mine of martial ability? Will I still be myself? If I am no longer myself, why should I still keep living?"

He fought free of Wen Kexing, turned, and left. The Great Shaman's words were on the tip of his tongue, but he did not utter them in the end, the words dissolving into a nearly imperceptible sigh—

Chapter 42 - Great Ruckus

Zhang Chengling followed uncomprehendingly behind the two men, sensing that his shifu had become a little different after changing his appearance. The atmosphere was stifling; not even Gu Xiang, off to the side, had the nerve to make a racket, following behind without daring to make a single sound.

Usually, once the two of them were put together, they would keep needling each other nonstop, both taking cracks at the other person to release excess energy. However, neither of them spoke, placing their respective attentions on putting one foot in front of the other. Zhou Zishu did not even put his human skin mask back on--no one here recognised him anyway.

He felt a sense of discomfort in his chest, like he was suffocating. The Great Shaman's words were like a heavy blow straight to his chest--if ridding himself of his martial ability granted a fifth of hope, he would rather not have this hope, and die slowly, peacefully, like this.

Throughout history, numerous pugilists, far too many to count, had fought one another for just one secret manual and failed tragically. That gongfu of his was trained through momentous perseverance, through the deepest winters and the hottest summers; through carving his own unprecedented path of understanding via laborious rumination.

It was not merely a possession of his, or merely a skill he was proficient at. It was the culmination of his entire soul.

What did it mean to rid himself of his martial ability? It was like a person missing his soul; he might as well have turned himself into an imbecile at the very beginning and live blissfully in idiocy.

Naturally, the Great Shaman had understood this. It was why he had only sighed in the end, and not persuaded him.

If he was missing a good portion of his soul, if he had not this last bit of dignity, was it not an empty existence that was only fulfilled by dying?¹²⁰ He indeed wished to live, but he did not wish to do so barely clinging onto his last thread of life.

Suddenly, Zhou Zishu could not help but raise his voice and sing, "Time flits by too fast for me, I fear how the years do not wait for me; at the break of dawn I hike up the mountain to gather magnolia, and at dusk I pluck hardy weeds from the river delta; the sun and moon continue to exchange places in the sky, just as how spring and

¹²⁰ This upper half of the couplet by Wu Weiye can be interpreted as a lament about him selling his life to the empire as a government official, which is pretty much Zhou Zishu's plight here.

autumn change over tirelessly; to think of how the grass withers and the trees shed their leaves, I fear the aging of the beautiful...¹²¹

That voice carried hints of hoarseness; in each word and every line, sorrow and anger had been tucked away, leaving only an indescribable viciousness and wild arrogance. This wild arrogance that he had been born with had reached the end of the road; it had wandered amongst the thousands of miles of rivers and mountains the people of the country made their living by, twisted and turned for far too long within his chest, and now, finally broke free from his throat.

The sky was gloomy, bearing down on them heavily. Gazing at the endless grasslands around them, there was only that one narrow path overgrown with weeds and littered with fallen branches. The northwestern gale did not know to stop howling; it rustled the grass forlornly, whistling through the fissures in rocks and through the woods like the wailing of a mountain spirit. It felt as if a thousand, even a million years could pass in the span of a day.

The breeze puffed up his wide sleeves, as if it was telling him to go with the wind. Wen Kexing lifted his head and observed Zhou Zishu's skeletal frame. The wind snapped the hair at his temples like a whip, lashing against the side of his face. Closing his eyes, he blocked out the image of that figure which had filled his wistful vision, and concentrated wholeheartedly on the burning agony he felt.

Cold wind swept into Zhou Zishu's throat, choking him. That tune of his, that had wandered far off-pitch, cut off abruptly as he bent slightly at the waist to cough. On his near-transparent lips, there was only a spot in the centre of his lips where there was some colour--an extremely, extremely thin line. Yet, it was as if it held the trace of a smile, a dark, blood red.

Wen Kexing raised his head to gaze at the sky that looked like it was about to fall, and a flake of something cool settled on his face--the first snow of Dongting had descended.

Why did the heroic have to face his eventual downfall? Why did the beautiful have to grow old one day?

Suddenly, a sense of resentment that he could not put into words rose within his chest. The resentment seemed to be on his own behalf, but also seemed to be on someone else's behalf, almost spilling over. He was resistant against accepting it; his fingers trembled as he felt an all-encompassing desire so strong that it could tear apart the heavens, the earth, and the mortal world with its might. He wanted to interrogate the heavens...what was natural creation? Why did they have to be beholden to the orchestrations of natural creation just because they lived, and suffer them?

¹²¹ From Warring States poet Qu Yuan's Li Sao (The Lament)

With trepidation, Gu Xiang watched her master look back at her, who smiled as he asked, “A-Xiang, do you like that dumb boy Cao Weining?”

Gu Xiang was dumbfounded for a moment, staring at her master in confusion. “Master...”

Wen Kexing asked, “Do you find him nice?”

Gu Xiang had the feeling that those eyes were gazing straight at her soul. Suddenly, an odd emotion welled up in her, and she thought, was Cao Weining nice? She recalled that person telling her, “what if you’re wrong, what if...you realised it in the future? I’m worried that you’ll feel troubled over this.” with a serious expression, recalled him hiking up his long sword with great effort to parry that couple of old demons and keep them at bay at all costs, whipping his head back at the moment of crisis. Those words, “Take him away first, hurry!”

Gu Xiang suddenly recalled that before this, no one had ever said things like letting her be the first to leave. Without knowing why, the edges of her eyes reddened, and she nodded sullenly, but only said, “Cao-dage is quite nice, he knows how to talk to people well, and he’s educated...”

Wen Kexing chuckled soundlessly, “Yes, he’s the only person who can utter something like ‘be utterly ignorant as you sleep like the dead in spring’.”

Gu Xiang could tell that he appeared to be saying something sarcastic, and actively defended, “‘Weary in the spring, exhausted in the autumn, and nap in the summer’; everyone gets sleepy during springtime, don’t they sleep like the dead and are unable to wake? The way I see it, what Cao-dage says is reasonable. His words aren’t only just a bit better than those bookworms who only talk of ‘the scent of chrysanthemum comes from the bitter cold’, they’re a lot better.”

With a mischievous air, Wen Kexing looked at this slightly-blushing young girl, and nodded. “Sure, let’s go rescue him then.”

Gu Xiang was taken aback. “Huh? Didn’t that Lord Seventh say just now that...”

Wen Kexing interrupted her loudly, “If I want to save someone, then I’ll save them, and if I want to kill someone, then I’ll kill them. I’ll do as I like, and I’ll see who in the world dares to block my path. Why prattle about so much? As a shabby, destitute pretty boy scholar,¹²² he doesn’t know anything! A-Xu, are you coming with?”

¹²² As we all know, Lord Seventh is loaded, but the shabby and destitute scholar is a Chinese archetype. Either you make the Imperial Examinations and live in luxury as an official, or you remain a poor student.

Zhou Zishu smiled. "I wouldn't dare not to."

The corner of Wen Kexing's mouth lifted slightly, but his brows were still drawn together, inexplicably giving off an air of killer frostiness. This made his face, on which the mask was stuck, look rather frightening, as he said, "Alright, A-Xiang, whoever you're willing to rescue, just go and rescue them. I will naturally accompany you in stirring up a great ruckus."

At this moment, Cao Weining was very disheveled. He had tumbled and was covered in mud as a mudskipper, the rags of his clothes stuck to him. One of his eyes was swollen nearly shut. Both his hands were tied behind his back, and his sword had been taken from him. Despite being shoved and stumbling for the whole journey, with Feng Xiaofeng bellowing and cursing sharply by his ear every now and then, for some reason, he was very much at peace.

He realised that he was really worthless. The teachings of their Qingfeng Sword Sect's ancestors dictated that "The individual goes where the sword goes; the individual dies when the sword shatters; uphold morality and righteousness; exterminate demonic evil." Now, despite the fact that his sword had been snapped and that he had probably been taken for one of those unorthodox villains, he did not take it to heart. Cao Weining had never considered himself one of those great figures who had the tremendous talent to govern, or the ability to shake the pugilist world with a stomp of his foot. As long as whatever he did was within his conscience, done without guilt, he was alright with it.

He only saw Zhou-xiong doing good deeds; saw Gu Xiang, such a frail and petite maiden, protecting the child of the Zhang family with her life. Conversely, it was the venerable orthodox who were bitterly forcing them to desperation.

What was good, and what was evil? All along, Cao Weining's greatest strength was his ability to keep an open mind.

Qingfeng Sword Sect taught him the path of good and evil, but did not teach him to pursue fame and personal interests. So, if others said that he was bad, that he had veered off the righteous path and willingly fell to evil, what could he do? Cao Weining thought about it. He felt quite sad, but sad as he was, he did not find that he had erred in any way. In a haze, he thought, If others do not think me good, then forget it. Anyway, by pursuing their own path in life, no one interferes in another's life. It's just that...I feel like I've let down my shifu and shishu a little.

It felt like Green Willow Grandpa had broken a rib of his: his chest blazed with agony every breath he took, and he was growing slightly disoriented. They threw him into a dark place, but without even glancing around first, Cao Weining closed his eyes and started regulating his qi. He intended to recuperate enough of his energy before escaping—he was still planning to escape, it didn't matter what happened to the others, but Gu Xiang was protecting Zhang Chengling all alone. Wasn't the situation

going to be very troublesome if they couldn't find Zhou-xiong and Wen-xiong, and ran into the Poisonous Scorpions again?

He did not know how long had passed before a commotion suddenly sounded outside. He heard an extremely familiar voice roaring, "Bullshit! Since when has our Qingfeng Sword Sect produced unorthodox evil? In fact, the way I see it, you peach-red and willow-green old demons are the ones who don't look like decent people!"

The scene before Cao Weining's eyes brightened as the door to the shack he was held in was opened. A group of people walked in; squinting, Cao Weining peered over with his wretched appearance and discovered that the one raging within the group was none other than his shishu Mo Huaikong. Instantly, Cao Weining thought, Oh no, my shishu is going to hit the roof.

Mo Huaikong had already hit the roof--in the instant he saw Cao Weining, he growled in fury. Snapping his sleeve, he shoved Green Willow Grandpa and made him fall on his ass without the slightest bit of respect for the elderly. Enraged, Peach Red Grandma screeched, "Mo Huaikong, you lunatic, what are you doing?!"

Mo Huaikong did not beat around the bush either. In front of everyone else, he roared back at her, "That is my shizhi! If he has done anything evil, my Sect Leader shixiong will naturally cleanse our sect of him. Do we require you two old demons to uselessly screech at us about what we should do?"

Internally, Cao Weining could not resist the silent cry of "Well said!", thinking that even though his shishu had a terrible temper, he ultimately still sided with him. However, Mo Huaikong's next sentence was, "Before you beat the dog, you still have to check who its owner is!"

At once, Cao Weining cried silent tears of dejection in his heart.

Out of the blue, Feng Xiaofeng yelped, and yanked over the Gaoshan slave, whose eyes had been bandaged. Pointing to Mo Huaikong, he accused, "What a good Qingfeng Sword Sect. Why don't you ask what good things your good shizhi has done? It's the little female demon that was with him who harmed A-Shan's eyes with poison, if I can't capture that little female demon, I will rip the eyes out of this little rascal Cao!"

Mo Huaikong was just about to speak, but someone off to the side humphed. "A little girl, executing such a vicious technique right off the bat--obviously, she's a little female demon. Why would Young Hero Cao mingle with this sort of shady woman? I would like to be enlightened on this matter."

This made Mo Huaikong swallow the words that he had just been about to utter. Mo Huaikong shot a venomous gaze at Cao Weining, and the latter opened his mouth to pathetically call, "Shishu."

Mo Huaikong fumed, "Who's your shishu?" He stepped forward, grabbed Cao Weining's collar, and said coldly, "Who was the person with you that they mention? Speak!"

Cao Weining opened his mouth, and mumbled, "That's...A...Xiang, A-Xiang isn't one of the bad ones, shishu, A-Xiang...A-Xiang..."

Peach Red Grandma scoffed. "A-Xiang? You're sure addressing her rather intimately."

Having hurried back from the other direction, Yu Qiufeng, who looked solemn on the outside but had his own nefarious intentions, butted in, "It is understandable for a young man to have been wrongly led astray by beauty. As long as you turn over a new leaf, all of us here are also not unreasonable people with petty hearts..."

Before he could finish speaking, Feng Xiaofeng raged, "I want to rip her eyes out!"

It was unknown whether he had intended to do so or not, but he successfully destroyed the stage that Yu Qiufeng had set for himself. Gritting his teeth in frustration, Yu Qiufeng had the desire to stomp on this shortie until he was dead.

At the present moment, Gao Chong, Zhao Jing, Reverend Cimu and the rest were absent as they were busy with the funeral preparations for Shen Zhen. Without a leader, this mob of vile crooks was like a group of dragons without a leader, and bickered among themselves even more flagrantly. Mo Huaikong's eyelid was twitching non-stop. Picking Cao Weining up from the ground, he growled through gritted teeth, "Unfilial disciple, speak honestly--where is the little female demon headed to, having kidnapped the Zhang child?"

With great effort, Cao Weining said, "A-Xiang didn't..."

Enraged, Mo Huaikong landed a slap on his face, which had already swelled up like a pig's head. At this exact moment, a clear, light voice announced, "The little female demon is over here, you old, shameless bunch, come and catch me if you're capable enough!"

Cao Weining's mind imploded--A-Xiang!

Chapter 43 - Rescue Mission

Gu Xiang appeared at the door brazenly, looking fearless and without care. Then she saw the tragic state Cao Weining was in, and a fire blazed in her heart. She scoffed, “I still thought that you so-called orthodox sects attack a person as a pack because you cannot best them in a fight alone, but in fact, it is actually that you have this tradition of doing so! Zhang Chengling, come out and tell them, where did I kidnap you to?”

It was only then did the crowd notice a mousey teenager following behind her, as if he was embarrassed at the prospect of speaking a few words where there were many people; this, on top of the savage expressions on the faces of Feng Xiaofeng and the rest prior, made him shiver involuntarily. Zhang Chengling shuffled to Gu Xiang’s side like a young bride, and mumbled softly, “Gu Xiang-jiejie did not kidnap me, I was the one who left with them.”

Green Willow Grandpa fumed, “Nonsense, you Zhang kid. Have you followed in the footsteps of others and fallen prey to beauty at this young age, and been hoodwinked by these demonic enchantresses?”

Upon seeing Gu Xiang, Feng Xiaofeng’s eyes turned red. Brandishing his machete, he swung it at her. “Wretched lass, leave your eyes behind!”

Turning sideways, Gu Xiang retreated three steps in succession and dodged the continuous blows that followed close behind one another. Gliding up to the rafters, she spoke from the advantageous height, “Shortie Feng, consider it that giant fool’s eight lifetimes’ worth of shit luck that he has to follow you around. This maiden is kind of heart and merciful of hand, and only blinded his pair of lookers, nothing more. If you’d bumped into any other person, they could even want his life. Not to mention that you purposely went looking for trouble and caused him to get hurt because of you, hmph...”

Her last “hmph” was a little weak, as the young girl flipped gracefully on the rafters. Dodging those who swarmed her in a hubbub and secretly anxious, she edged closer to where Cao Weining was.

Huang Daoren glided up to the rafters too, grabbed hold of Gu Xiang, and attacked her without warning. Not willing to be disadvantaged thusly, Gu Xiang ducked away and jumped onto another broad joist, stretching an arm out to hook it around the horizontal beam, and whirled beautifully in mid-air. She made a flinging motion with her hand, shouting, “Watch out!”

Alarmed as he did not know what kind of wicked hidden weapon this little demon girl of unknown origin had in hand, Huang Daoren growled and took a huge step back. But there was nothing at all; when he took a second look, Gu Xiang had already left him behind and was giggling without even looking back at him. “Ugly freak, I’ll scare the life out of you!”

Mo Huaikong had long set Cao Weining, who was in heart-pounding anxiety off to one side, down as he watched on impassively. Though his stupid shizhi had gotten into trouble, he thought that this young maiden, who had clearly escaped but returned to save him, was evidently also someone who honored her ties, but was just slightly harder to deal with.

He cast an eye at Cao Weining and his silly demeanor, like he was vibrating with the urge to go lend Gu Xiang a hand. Mouth twisting, he thought that if she was hard to deal with, so be it; anyway, if someone was willing to marry a ferocious wife in the future, it was like a beating willingly dished out and suffered--consensual on both ends.

Right at this moment, Peach-Red and Willow-Green pounced at her from right and left, trapping Gu Xiang between them. Taking clear action, she lifted a leg and a dagger sprung out, aiming straight at Green Willow Grandpa's skull. However, Green Willow Grandpa still had some capabilities: he did not duck or hide, but swiped his cane horizontally. Gu Xiang felt a gust of strong wind rush at her, knew that she could not beat it, and swiftly retracted her leg. But she was not fast enough, and the dagger on the tip of her shoe was shattered.

Gu Xiang whipped back around immediately, thinking of reusing the same trick, but Peach Red Grandma had already crept up behind her.

Panicked, Gu Xiang exclaimed, "I'm about to die, and you're still enjoying the show!"

There was a light laugh, before Peach Red Grandma felt a gust of wind sweep at her and slam into her back. It was too late for her to dodge; she could only spring forward with all her might and stick herself onto the rafters like a giant lizard. Gu Xiang took the chance to hop off the rafters, and the crowd only noticed then that the thing that had nearly scared the daylights out of Peach Red Grandma was actually a walnut shell...and it was only half of one.

Immediately after, the "crack" of a walnut being unshelled came from the doorway. A man with unassuming features was holding a small packet of walnuts in his hand. Two fingertips pinched inwards, and the walnut shell burst open. He then threw the kernel into his mouth, and feasted on it delightfully. Beside him followed an even more sorry-looking person. These two people looked like they were born of the same mother, since they shared the same yellowish-green coloring and puffy eyes.

The one holding the walnuts was still politely offering them to the one beside him, saying, "You're not eating them?"

Like he was dodging a catastrophe, the one beside him arched backwards, and replied with an expression of revulsion, "Get this thing further away from me."

The one holding the walnuts laughed. “Oh, the great...is afraid of eating walnuts? Silly, this is good stuff. Eating these make you smarter, they enrich your brain.¹²³”

The one beside him took two steps forward and reached out to grab hold of Zhang Chengling’s shoulders, saying, “No matter how you enrich a pig’s brain, it’ll stay the same.”

Yu Qiufeng’s brow wrinkled as he questioned commandingly, “Who are you?”

The person holding Zhang Chengling close shoved the youth forward and murmured by his ear softly, “I find him an eyesore. Go beat him up on my behalf.”

Mouth agape, Zhang Chengling looked at him dumbly. “Shi...I...”

“You, what? They bullied your Gu Xiang-jiejie, and you’re just standing aside? Are you a man, or are you not?”

Zhang Chengling extended a finger to point at Yu Qiufeng, then pointed at himself at a loss. “This...that...”

That strange man despised his hand-wringing, and kicked him on his rear. Stumbling two steps forward, Zhang Chengling nearly fell into Yu Qiufeng’s arms.

Ecstatic, Yu Qiufeng scrambled to put on a gentle voice, and told Zhang Chengling, “Child of the Zhang family, come to me.”

Still, Zhang Chengling gazed around with his wide eyes and lost expression, looking exactly like a little rabbit that could not find its way home. The one holding the walnuts chuckled softly and said, “You’re too cruel.”

The one beside him replied impassively, “After a baby hawk grows up, the old hawk will boot it out of the nest. I’m doing this for his own good.”

Zhang Chengling, who had been regarded as a baby eagle, retreated a timid step back, treating Yu Qiufeng exactly like an old pervert who specifically preyed on young children. On the other hand, Feng Xiaofeng was not as polite as the Huashan Sect Leader. He followed this train of thought: this little Zhang fellow looked to be a part of their crew, and seizing him was good too, since they wouldn’t have to fear not being able to hold back these few people that way. Who cared who he was, as long as he didn’t kill him while seizing him?

¹²³ For those not familiar with Chinese medicinal beliefs about food, certain foods are thought to be tonics for certain parts of your body. Walnuts are beneficial to the brain presumably because they look like tiny brains.

So he swooped forward, and stretched out a hand to seize Zhang Chengling.

Uselessly, Zhang Chengling turned and fled, still shouting, “Heavens,¹²⁴ shifu, he wants to seize me!”

A snicker escaped the one holding the walnuts, who used the tip of his shoe to poke the one beside him. “I say, your baby hawk’s feathers are puffed up in fright.”

“Hopeless,” the man muttered, and delivered a palm strike through the air. Zhang Chengling felt a great wave of energy surging at him, as if someone had shoved him hard and halted his steps. Immediately after, his arms were propped up like a puppet on strings, which met with the incoming Feng Xiaofeng head-on. Frightened, Zhang Chengling closed his eyes, his hands clenching instinctively, and his fist landed right on the bridge of Feng Xiaofeng’s nose.

He hit that shortie into letting loose an earth-shaking howl; Zhang Chengling opened his eyes and looked at his own fist dizzily, unable to believe it. Someone’s voice tunnelled across the distance. It was his shifu’s voice ringing by his ear once more, reprimanding him, “Idiot, why are you in a daze? Kick his danzhong acupuncture point!¹²⁵”

Reflexively, Zhang Chengling did as per his instructions. He sensed that the gust of energy had not dispersed, but had rather surged into his four limbs. It pushed him to put a leg forward and, incredibly, sent Feng Xiaofeng flying with a kick.

Yu Qiufeng asked loudly, “Who are you?”

That strange man did not speak, but slammed another palm towards Zhang Chengling’s back. With a loud yelp, Zhang Chengling pounced at Yu Qiufeng. Gaze hardening, Yu Qiufeng pulled a long sword out of nowhere, and met him head-on. It looked as if Zhang Chengling was about to be impaled on his sword, and the youth was greatly frightened, his legs carrying him forward of their own accord as he yipped, “Shifu, save me!”

The voice by his ear spoke once more. “Since the tip of his sword is trembling slightly, he must have another move following on the heels of this one. Retreat with the Nine Palaces Steps,¹²⁶ and strike the side of his arm.”

Finding great reason in these words, Zhang Chengling involuntarily took a sideways step forward and whirled away from the tip of Yu Qiufeng’s sword.

¹²⁴ 娘啊: If literally translated, he’s crying for Mommy.

¹²⁵ Located at the sternum, in between your nip nips.

¹²⁶ Also called the Lo Shu formation, the Nine Palaces formation is closely associated with the Eight Trigrams as part of feng shui. It dictates the placement of objects to help with the flow of qi.

Instantly, Yu Qiufeng's sword trembled, and plagued him once more like a shadow. Without faltering, Zhang Chengling brought his right leg another step forward. The posture was awkward, extremely odd and clumsy, but somehow, he dodged Yu Qiufeng's blow. Then, respectfully following his shifu's instructions to "strike the side of his arm", he shut his eyes, gritted his teeth, and headbutted his target.

The one who was snacking on walnuts was none other than Wen Kexing, who was thrilled upon witnessing this sight: what Zhou Zishu had taught Zhang Chengling was none other than one of the top qinggong techniques, the Drifting Clouds Nine Palaces Steps. It sought movement as light as drifting clouds and flying willow catkin, and when it was applied, a person would truly look like a gliding immortal. It was elegantly genteel and very nice to look at, and Wen Kexing knew, for the first time, that someone could perform this Drifting Clouds Nine Palaces Steps like a black bear performing a dance.

Beside him, however, Zhou Zishu's brow relaxed. He discovered that although this child's movements were clumsy, he had not misstepped once, and knew that Zhang Chengling took his studies seriously--had learnt the mantra and practiced the same steps innumerable times, over and over, that despite being this panicked, his feet did not mess up the steps in the face of danger.

Yu Qiufeng had suffered great injuries to his core when he had slammed palms with Wen Kexing that day; now, upon absorbing the impact of Zhang Chengling's skull, the weapon he had just armed himself with instantly slipped out of his grasp. Furious, he shouted, "Don't let them escape!"

At this, the crowd immediately surrounded Zhang Chengling. This was not something that Zhang Chengling could handle, so Wen Kexing stuffed the half-eaten packet of walnuts at Zhou Zishu as he said, "Hold this for me, granddaddy is going to discipline this bunch of grandsons!" and charged into the fray, laughing uproariously.

Zhou Zishu had always found walnuts very repulsive: they tasted disgusting, and also looked like human brains. Revolted, he pinched the packet with two fingers and held it far away from himself at arm's length, while he continued to instruct Zhang Chengling by sending his voice across the distance as he remained a spectator.

Gu Xiang took the chance to sneak to Cao Weining's side, punting a person who tried to stop her, and glared venomously at Mo Huaikong. She thought, I don't care who you are--if you dare to block my path, I'll give you the same treatment as well!

Yet, even before she could draw near, she saw Mo Huaikong suddenly exclaim "Aiyo" and bend at the waist. His expression was agonised as he pointed at a baffled Gu Xiang and panted raggedly, "This...this little demon girl is...is too strong, I am no match for her any longer!"

Then he sat down on the floor with a plop, eyes shut tight, and stopped moving.

Gu Xiang and Cao Weining glanced at each other, neither of them knowing how to react.

Mo Huaikong, who had closed his eyes, suddenly opened one and cast it at them, scolding them a low voice, "Hurry up and run, have you become stupid?"

Gu Xiang whipped out her dagger immediately and cut away the rope binding Cao Weining with a few efficient strokes. Jumping to his feet, Cao Weining replied in an equally soft voice, "Many thanks to shishu."

Gu Xiang followed suit hastily, "Old man, we will never forget your great mercy for as long as we live. When I make it out, I will definitely erect a memorial archway in your name!"

"Fuck you, you're the one that has an archway erected for yourself, your whole family has archways erected for them!" As he shut his eyes tight and faked incapacitation, Mo Huaikong cursed nonstop silently, discovering that although this young maiden Gu Xiang had a decent appearance, her words truly rubbed people the wrong way.

Seeing that Gu Xiang and Cao Weining had already fled, Zhou Zishu suddenly flitted over, grabbed Zhang Chengling by the back of his neck, and swung him like a bat. Whirled in mid-air, Zhang Chengling's leg hit Huang Daoren in the chest, forcing him back ten or so steps. Taking the opportunity to stuff the packet of walnuts into Zhang Chengling's arms, Zhou Zishu told Wen Kexing, "Are you enjoying this too much to leave? Hurry up and let's go!"

Wen Kexing chortled and flew out of the crowd, saying, "Just as the lush mountains will remain evergreen and the clear rivers flowing, our ties will remain as they are until we next meet. I will be taking my leave now, everyone!"

Then he left side-by-side with Zhou Zishu, who had hold of Zhang Chengling. The qinggong of both men were unrivaled; at full strength, it was impossible for anyone to catch up with them, and there was no trace of them in the blink of an eye.

The three of them fled and stopped only when they were far away. Setting Zhang Chengling down, Zhou Zishu tore off his human skin mask and straightened his robes. Lowering his head, he saw Zhang Chengling gazing back at him with a pair of shiny eyes like a tiny critter begging for praise, and the movement of his hand paused. The tradition he adhered to in the past was that his shidi must be punished for any mistake made, otherwise he would not remember the lesson; if his shidi did well, to prevent him from being full of himself, he could not be praised. However, as he looked at the child's expectant manner before him, his heart softened of its own accord. He thought about it, and said, "Your qinggong is passable."

Zhang Chengling was overjoyed, but Zhou Zishu's expression darkened immediately as he reprimanded, "What are you so proud of? Look at your lack of courage--you only know how to howl for help once you run into the smallest problem, how disgraceful."

Zhang Chengling went back to hanging his head in dejection, but a warm hand suddenly covered the back of his skull. Chuckling, Wen Kexing told him, "Don't listen to what he says, that bit of skin of his is as thin as paper. He gets shy more easily when he takes his mask off..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Zhou Zishu had turned around with a fake smile on his face, and asked in a low voice, "Lao Wen, what are you saying?"

Instantly changing his tune, Wen Kexing corrected himself, "I said that you're calm even in the face of disaster, and utterly unshakable when confronted with danger. Your skin isn't thin at all, you don't know the meaning of shame, and not even a stake can penetrate your skin."

Out of the blue, Zhou Zishu reached out to cradle his face. Wen Kexing froze, stunned, and Zhou Zishu did not speak either. He merely leaned in very close, his eyes staring intensely at Wen Kexing, unblinking.

Zhang Chengling peered at one, before looking at the other, but could not figure out what they were doing at all. An incense stick would have burnt down wholly before Zhou Zishu finally let go of Wen Kexing with the hint of a smile, and flicked his earlobe, laughing, "You're finally blushing, now."

Wen Kexing took a dazed step forward--his arm and leg along one side of his body swung at the same time.

Zhou Zishu laughed heartily.

Abruptly, his laughter halted. Zhang Chengling and Wen Kexing traced the direction of his gaze, and saw a man in white robes who was standing not too far away looking over at them expressionlessly.

Chapter 44 - Shuzhong

Upon seeing that it was Ye Baiyi, Wen Kexing's expression grew foul. Upon seeing that Ye Baiyi was staring unblinkingly at Zhou Zishu's face, Wen Kexing's expression grew even more foul.

Zhou Zishu, on the other hand, was rather surprised. From a distance away, he bowed and said, "Senior Ye."

Ye Baiyi looked at him for another long while, before he remarked, "It's you? Why do you always have to make yourself look so ghastly--do you not look quite like a proper human like this? Moreover, the ancients have the saying 'Wherever you go and no matter the situation, one should not change his name', much less the looks naturally bestowed on you by your parents. Do you not know what is meant by 'to live as plain as day'?"

Zhou Zishu raised his head to look at the sky, as if this action could suppress his quiet desire to smack Ye Baiyi flat. Half a beat later, he finally lowered his head, put on an apologetic, humble smile, and said graciously, "As Senior chides."

Indifferent, Ye Baiyi nodded, and told them, "Follow me."

Wen Kexing felt that it was impossible to make sense of this old fart's stubbornness through logical means, and humphed coldly. "Who are you? Do I know you?"

Ye Baiyi looked back at him. It was impossible to discern any particular happy or unhappy expression from his face. He remained silent for a while, before he asked, "Do you all not want to know what happened to Rong Xuan and his wife Yue Feng'er thirty years ago, as well as what the truth behind that whole Lapis Armour mess is?"

Wen Kexing, who had already turned away and was about to walk off, abruptly halted in his tracks. With his face turned to the ground, it was impossible for anyone to tell what expression he had on.

The few of them were at such an impasse for a half-beat, before Wen Kexing finally turned around and asked in a very incredulous tone of voice, "Why would we...want to know what happened to Rong Xuan and his wife?"

Suddenly, Ye Baiyi sighed, and said, "When you live to be the age I am now, you will understand that sometimes, being able to tell what a person wants is not as difficult as you think."

Wen Kexing immediately disliked his tone of voice that was flaunting his seniority.

Zhou Zishu exchanged glances with him, and asked, "Does Senior have some information?"

Ye Baiyi smiled briefly--because of that stiff face of his, it was always impossible for others to tell if he had sincerely intended a smile, or if it was a sarcastic, fake one. Soon afterwards, they heard him say, "What do I know? I am no more than an old fool who has lived for many years as a hermit on Changming Mountain, what can I know?"

He turned and walked on, with his back towards them. "Although I do know one person who might be clear about what happened all those years ago."

Zhou Zishu instructed Zhang Chengling, "Keep up", and caught up to Ye Baiyi. Wen Kexing found it a little odd as well, so he asked, "What person has such omnipotent knowledge?"

Ye Baiyi did not even look back as a few words drifted from his mouth. "Long Que of the Puppet Manor."

Zhou Zishu's brow furrowed as he could not help but point out, "Legend has it that there is indeed such a Puppet Manor within Shuzhong, but it is concealed deep within the mountains. The lord of the Puppet Manor, Long Que, is a master of traps and of the art of the vanishing door; that manor appears to be migratory. I have repeatedly ordered men to create a map, and each time, the one who edited the map would swear that there was nothing wrong with the map, but when one visited the place again, there would be no trace of the manor that appears and vanishes mysteriously..."

Ye Baiyi said, "You're useless."

--Indeed, a dog's mouth could not utter anything as precious as ivory.

Zhou Zishu closed his eyes, took a deep breath, unclenched his fist to clench it once more, and silently regarded Ye Baiyi's head, which he found increasingly suitable for clobbering. To one side, Zhang Chengling was tugging at the corner of his shirt, opening his mouth to ask a question, but was viciously glared at by Zhou Zishu. Irritably whisking the corner of his shirt back, Zhou Zishu scolded, "You're a rascal of more than a decade old, if you have something to say, say it. What are you doing, being a shrinking violet of a young wife?"

He was clearly enraged; Zhang Chengling retracted his head, and did not dare to speak.

Zhou Zishu casted a glance at him. "Hurry up and say what you have to say!"

"Shi, shifu, are we going to keep heading to Shuzhong?"

Zhou Zishu startled, realising that he was right, it was a rather long journey. Thus, Zhang Chengling brought trouble upon himself: because he had asked a question that he should not have asked, he was tortured in a multitude of ways by his evil shifu Zhou Zishu for the rest of the journey. Sometimes, he was made to reverse his flow of qi and walk on his hands; other times, Zhou Zishu pressed a hand down onto his shoulder, ordering that teenager to strenuously hurry his way forth with all the energy he had, almost as if he were bearing a load as heavy as that of a enormous mountain...it was worse than death.

Off to one side, Wen Kexing didn't speak. He kept loudly cracking his walnuts open and snacking on them, disgusting Zhou Zishu while appearing to be thoughtfully contemplating an issue at the same time. Seeing that Zhou Zishu was ignoring the old mule Ye Baiyi, he made rare conversation with Ye Baiyi. "How are you...related to Rong Xuan? Why do you want to know what happened thirty years ago?"

Ye Baiyi looked at him, and remained silent for a long while. Just when Wen Kexing thought that he was about to say something, he heard that bird's beak of Zhou Zishu peck its nonsense, "Why do you want to ask about everyone's business, like those old maids who love to gossip? What does that have to do with you?"

Wen Kexing exerted force on his fingers, and a walnut shell splintered in his hand. Like a hidden weapon, the pieces shot out about a zhang out, bringing with them a strong gust of wind. Zhang Chengling instantly ducked away as far as he could to save himself from getting embroiled in danger.¹²⁷

Wen Kexing was about to snipe at him for a few lines more, but a glimmer caught his eye. Focusing his gaze, he discovered a surprising strand of silver among Ye Baiyi's long hair, and he noted incredulously, "Hm? Ye, you're greying."

He did not know if it was just his imagination, but in that instant, Ye Baiyi's wooden pupils seemed to flash, so fleetingly that it was imperceptible. Subconsciously, he raised a hand to touch his own hair, but halfway to his head, he put it down again, and only said indifferently, "Have you not even seen white hair before? An ignorant person would find everything strange."

Wen Kexing thought about it. True, this old freak was ancient; if this was any other person, their remains would have grown cold by now. What was a strand of white?

After that, he could no longer find a topic of conversation, as Ye Baiyi had the ability of steering people away from irritating him. On the road from Dongting to

¹²⁷ 城门失火，殃及池鱼：Literally describes a situation where the fish in the moat die when the city gates catch on fire, because the citizens drain the moat for fire rescue purposes. Aka if they're fighting a battle, you, a third party who should not be involved, die too.

Shuzhong, Ye Baiyi was like a mannequin that could walk--it was only when he ate, where that great force of nature which could sweep away an armada as effortlessly as rolling up a mat made people realise that he was a living being.

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing were bored to tears. With nothing to do, they could only bicker and make digs at each other, endlessly raucous. At first, Ye Baiyi still listened to them expressionlessly and calmly--until later on, when he felt that the both of them were being ridiculous, upon which he snarked, "If the two of you are capable enough, scram and go tussle in bed. Stop jabbering, you're like two huge crickets. Is it that you can't get it up, or that you're maidens disguised as men? What are you pretending to be restrained for? Taking your mushy touchy-feely as entertainment, both of you, shut up!"

Zhang Chengling was currently walking on his hands according to how Zhou Zishu had taught him. Reversing his flow of qi was supremely tough in the first place, and upon hearing this, he first froze, before something vaguely clicked in the half-grown child's mind. His face turned red, his qi hit a snag, and he tumbled over instantly, clutching his neck as he cried "Aiyo, aiyo", blushing.

If Ye Baiyi had not claimed that he could locate the "Puppet Manor", Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing were almost planning to team up and teach this old fart a lesson. The two of them exchanged looks with unspoken coordination, but for some unknown reason, when Wen Kexing glanced at that person's handsome expression of barely-suppressed ire, his gaze unconsciously drifted downwards, as if he could see past his robes to look at the flesh and bones within. He imagined it for a moment, his Adam's apple bobbing once, and suddenly felt like there was indeed some reason to Ye Baiyi's words.

With their last mode of entertainment gone, the two of them spontaneously teamed up to torture Zhang Chengling.

If Zhou Zishu told him to "gather your true qi, and let it surge into your qihai,¹²⁸ guide it through your meridians, to turn it onto its head as it circulates as it pleases, freely", Wen Kexing would secretly inform him that "your internal qi is unstable, and your martial power is too weak, which is why your internal qi scatters easily and does not gather as readily", that he should "steadily progress in proper sequence, feel the true qi in you, and let nature take its course."

What both of them said sounded very reasonable, and poor Zhang Chengling did not know which one to listen to. As he boggled, the true qi on him gathered for a second just to scatter the next, or flowed in the proper direction for a moment just to reverse its direction the next. Occasionally, he still had to undergo that special training method of Zhou Zishu's--Zhou Zishu did not look like he had put in much strength, but that hand weighing on Zhang Chengling's shoulder felt like a million cattles.

¹²⁸ An acupoint 1.5 inches below your belly button

A smidgen of worry involuntarily rose in Zhang Chengling's heart as he thought, what if he could not grow taller because of how his shifu kept pressing down on him over a long period of time? Feng Xiaofeng's savage and feral mien surfaced in his mind, and he involuntarily shivered.

Zhou Zishu did not know about his internal worries, and felt that while this child was indeed hardworking, he simply could not grasp the essence of the teachings. Back when he had taught Liang Jiuxiao, Zhou Zishu had always grumbled that he was too stupid--many times, he had only just managed to suppress his agitation to teach him. Yet, who knew, that compared to Zhang Chengling, Liang Jiuxiao was a top-tier genius.

If it weren't for these years he spent in court, which had since ground him down to patience a long time ago, Zhou Zishu felt that he could even have had the urge to kill this child who gave him much grief with a single palm strike.

In truth, Zhang Chengling was also wronged. In the first place, Wen Kexing's gongfu and Zhou Zishu's gongfu did not share the same approach; if it had been one person teaching him, he still could have made some progress. However, between these two, neither of them knew how to teach a disciple. If one of them said something, the other had to say their own piece, and they did not care if others could understand them. Sometimes, as they yammered on, they would even start quarrelling between themselves, and if they could not settle their quarrels, they would leave to explosively fight their mutual discontent out, before returning. In the end, it would always result in the flushed faces of both parties, and one Ye Baiyi explaining as a narrator would off to one side that they were "using the excuse of exchanging techniques to partake in improper affairs". All his words served to do was to inspire an unending wave of thoughts in a perpetually embarrassed Zhang Chengling, while he, simultaneously, understood nothing.

As the days went by, he felt that not only was his martial ability not improving, it showed signs of regression. The hand his shifu weighed on his shoulder only seemed to grow heavier by the day, and was about to crush the breath out of him.

In truth, this method of learning gongfu that Zhang Chengling had adopted was extremely risky. If it were anyone else suffering the torment inflicted by these two, without Zhou Zishu's burdensome hand on his shoulder inconspicuously helping him to regulate his internal qi, he would have undergone qi deviation a long time ago.

They travelled extremely swiftly on foot. Not many days later, they had already left Dongting, that place of trouble, far behind and reached Shuzhong.

On this day, Zhang Chengling genuinely could not keep walking any further; clenching his teeth, he forced himself to walk for more than ten li. Temple throbbing continuously, he panted heavily with his mouth open, and his heart felt like it was

about to leap out of his chest. For every step he took, he had to exert all the energy that he had.

Zhou Zishu's voice rang frostily by his ear. "Why, it's only this, and you can't take it anymore? Keep going!"

Wen Kexing turned his head over to glance at him and raised his eyebrow, like he too felt that Zhang Chengling was pitiable, and could not help but interrupt, "A-Xu..."

"Shut up." Zhou Zishu's eyebrow did not even so much as twitch a little, lacking even the slightest bit of humanity as he was. He ordered, "Little tyke, I told you to keep walking."

It was already growing blurry and dark before Zhang Chengling's eyes. He wanted to speak, but he could not; once he opened his mouth, his internal qi would start to leak out, and when that happened, Zhou Zishu's hand, which only looked as thin as firewood, would drive him into the ground like he was replanting a carrot.

Shuzhong was mountainous. All around them, the ground rose and fell in seemingly boundless undulations, and a sense of despair, one of never being able to reach the end of this endless journey, suddenly rose within Zhang Chengling. The trembling of his legs was growing more vigorous, and he raised his head with great effort to look at his shifu's face. That handsome side profile was still frosty and did not even glance at him. It was like a stone statue with no sentiments and no desires.

"Breaths continuous and unending, passing through the rendu; like hundreds of rivers flowing into the sea, without leaving a trace--"

"There is form to internal qi, as agile as a snake; never extinguished, never broken, it ebbs and flows freely--"

In that split-second, faced with the mountain range of Shuzhong, when it felt like Zhang Chengling had been forced into despair, a line swiftly flashed through his mind--with form, yet no bounds; scatters, but never extinguished!

He felt, all of a sudden, his chest brimming with energy and his vision growing increasingly blurry, but he was able to feel the changes within his body more intimately. In truth, the internal qi that was diffused throughout his whole body had always been there; it was merely that he had not the correct way to engage it. Once he understood the concept, he suddenly felt a great wave of energy surge out of him, which even forcefully dislodged the hand Zhou Zishu had on his shoulder.

The last thing he saw was Zhou Zishu's stunned expression, then everything went black before his eyes and he fainted headfirst.

Chapter 45 - Anticipation

Zhou Zishu frowned at his hand that had been flung off. Ye Baiyi looked back and coolly said, "Not bad. You've finally pushed him over the edge to his death, are you satisfied?"

Wen Kexing was the only one with some conscience: he bent to 'retrieve' Zhang Chengling, placed a palm on his back, and channelled a thin thread of true qi into his body. A while later, he made a soft sound of surprise, and said, "This kid...unbelievably, his meridians are wider across than those of any ordinary person by nature. Could it be that he's actually a wondrous talent?"

Zhou Zishu replied, "Indeed. I discovered it when I was helping him regulate his qi after he was injured by Enchanted Song's shockwaves that time."

He took Zhang Chengling from Wen Kexing's hands. The youth's face was pale and his brow was tightly knit. The hems of his trouser legs dangled above his ankles, just on this side of too short. In the short jiffy of a month and a half, he seemed to have grown a little taller again. Zhang Chengling was born to the Zhang family, and was, furthermore, Hero Zhang's only son; after so many years, he should not have been this lacklustre. That day, when Zhou Zishu had helped to heal his injury, he had discovered that this child's neigong foundations had in fact been sturdily built; it was only that he could not use it.

"To draw a comparison, he was like a young child who had been armed with a sharp weapon, but had not the strength to wield it.

Witnessing this, Ye Baiyi also found it interesting, and reached a hand over to pinch Zhang Chengling on various parts of his body. He remarked curiously, "Unbelievably, such a person exists on this earth: one with a phenomenally stupid brain, but born with great physique. Is Heaven intending for him to lead a blessed life, or a difficult one?"

Thereafter, he glanced at Zhou Zishu and said, "His meridians are clear and wide. He is excellent material to work with in the first place, but his ability to grasp concepts is too poor, and conversely he has more difficulty than any other to figure out the path...yes, you can push him a little further; anyway, he won't be dying anytime soon."

Most thankfully, Zhang Chengling had merely fainted.

Because of Zhang Chengling, that day, the other three decided to find a place to stay and wait a night for this little tyke to recover before entering the mountains. As usual, Zhou Zishu was punctually tortured into wakefulness at midnight by the nails in him. He curled up into a ball, fingers pressing on his chest, but he did not use his internal energy to suppress it. He only laid on the bed with his eyes open, staring at

the moonlight shining in through the window, looking as if he was in a daze--he was intimately experiencing the sensation of those nails in his body.

Compared to before, the Three Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupunctures did not only hurt when they acted up now. The original sensation that felt like someone was using a small knife to rummage around in his chest appeared to have lessened, or it might have been that he had already grown numb to it. Conversely, there was a new, gradual sensation of something weighing down on his chest that caused his breath to stutter between exhalations, and it seemed to have grown more and more distinct over the past few days.

Zhou Zishu knew that this was some kind of omen--of the three years, slightly less than half of it had already passed.

A long time ago, he had always thought that these three additional years were a sort of kindness. But he only knew now that it was, in fact, another form of cruel torture.

Death did not scare him--for the past twenty-odd years, it had not been easy for him to survive till today. All the techniques he had used to force Zhang Chengling to pick up gongfu were ones that he had suffered through when he was younger; he had suffered even more merciless ones, and he did not even have that child's natural gift to stand that harshness without the slightest bit of damage. He had lived through so much, experienced so many events that he was unafraid of anyone or anything on this earth. If he was fearless in life, what was so terrifying about death?

However, what agonised him were these three years, in which he had to count down the days as he awaited his death.

He had weathered through so much with his unshakeable will, and never once held a death wish. Yet, in these days--where he had the most freedom, had the least attachments to miss, and was most merry and wild--he had to wait for death to come. Wasn't it very ironic?

Zhou Zishu discovered that this was probably another stupid thing that he had done.

At this moment, there was a light knock on his door from the outside. Zhou Zishu paused, taken aback--Wen Kexing and Ye Baiyi never knocked. He climbed off the bed. The surge of dull pain in his chest nearly made him lie back down again. His hand unconsciously tightened around the blanket; drawing in two deep breaths, he engaged his true qi with strenuous effort to suppress that suffocating feeling, before finally putting on a sullen expression to answer the door.

Zhang Chengling was standing outside, one hand still hesitantly raised like he had wanted to knock again. Once the door opened and he saw Zhou Zishu's poor

complexion, he instantly lowered his head guiltily and in distress like he had committed some abominable sin, and mumbled in a voice as soft as a mosquito's buzz, "Shifu."

Zhou Zishu frowned. "What are you doing?"

The corner of Zhang Chengling's mouth tugged downwards. He looked as though he wanted to cry, but was holding it back. "Shifu, I just woke up...and couldn't fall back asleep."

Zhou Zishu crossed his arms and leant against the door jamb, scoffing, "So...you're saying that you want me to sing you a lullaby and lull you to sleep?"

Zhang Chengling buried his head even lower; Zhou Zishu worried that his neck was going to snap. It was currently deep in winter, and even in Shuzhong, it was rather chilly at midnight. With his internal injury acting up, Zhou Zishu could not withstand the cold too well. Still feeling a little cold from the slight breeze blowing at him, he picked up his wine flask and took a huge swig, looking at Zhang Chengling with annoyance as he asked, "Can you be more straightforward? If you have something to say, quickly say it, if you have a fart to let loose, quickly let it loose."

Zhang Chengling said in a quiet voice, "Shifu, I dreamt of my father and them again. It's been so long, why haven't I forgotten them? Am I especially useless?"

Zhou Zishu paused. After a long while, Zhang Chengling assumed that Zhou Zishu did not want to bother with him any longer, and furtively lifted his head to look at him. He was very much regretting coming over here without a second thought, but discovered that Zhou Zishu had turned slightly to take a step aside, and faintly nodded at him, signalling for him to enter.

Like he had been greatly relieved of a burden, Zhang Chengling waddled in obediently after him.

Zhou Zishu lit the candle. There was no water in the room, so he took a cup, unfastened the flask to pour half a cup of wine, and handed it to Zhang Chengling. Zhang Chengling did not know that his wine was strong and drank a mouthful, only to feel a small fire burn a line from his throat to his stomach. His face turned red instantly and he choked, unable to form any words.

Zhou Zishu looked at his silly demeanour, and his tense face relaxed slightly of its own accord. He turned his head aside, chuckling lightly.

This was Zhang Chengling's first time seeing his "strict master" laugh in his direction with his own face, and he did not dare to even exhale too loudly, staring dumbly at him.

When they had met in Jiangnan that year, he had no one to rely on. Around him, there was only this man who talked loquaciously to others but had few words for him, and he clung to him like a drowning man grasping at a lifeline. He knew that his shifu was good, and could not help but want to be close to him, but was also afraid that he sparked his irritation--although his shifu did look like he was perpetually irritated by him. Slowly, this cautious treading turned into fearful respect; every time he wanted to talk to him, he had to undergo a bout of trembling from his nerves.

But even so, every time he felt sad, he still could not help but come look for him--in Zhang Chengling's heart, his father and shifu looked completely different from head to toe, but for some unknown reason, he just felt that they were the same sort of person.

That sort of person who was tall and broad, courageous and strong, and who...treated him well.

Zhang Chengling said, "Shifu, we followed Senior Ye here to look for that Puppet Manor and to ask about the Lapis Armour. After we clarify the things that happened so many years ago, will we then know why they wanted to kill my father?"

Zhou Zishu cocked an eyebrow, and avoided the topic to give a brisk answer, "Who knows."

Zhang Chengling frowned, and wracked his brains over it for a moment before saying, "Shifu, do you think that there are people who will kill others without any reason? I've thought a lot about it, is the reason why they want to kill my father because my father has done something evil?"

Zhou Zishu thought about it for a while. This question was too immense, and had stumped him. Not knowing how to explain it for the moment, he lowered his head to look at that little tyke who was still furrowing his brow like he was troubled to the bones, picked him up by the collar, and dragged him out of the room, saying, "Since you've slept so much in the day that it's left you with fuck-all to do now and unable to sleep, as the stupid and slow bird has to set off first to avoid falling behind, you might as well practice properly. It seems like I haven't pushed you hard enough, that you still have the energy to continue imagining nonsensical things."

As he spoke, he grabbed a handful of small pebbles from the ground, bent his fingers and, out of the blue, flicked them at Zhang Chengling. Zhang Chengling was unable to dodge in time; the pebble hit him right in the head, and just as he exclaimed "aiyo", another pebble had arrived. Left with no choice, he could only scramble away on his hands and knees, while his evil demon of a shifu derided, "In the gongfu I taught you, there isn't a move called 'Dog Eats Shit'."

At this moment, Zhang Chengling did not have time to think, and could only put in his whole effort to counter those small pebbles cascading onto him like a tightly-

woven net with no way out. He only let out a sigh of relief when Zhou Zishu had depleted his pebbles, but even before he had finished exhaling that breath, he heard Zhou Zishu say, "Was that thing you performed the Drifting Clouds Nine Palaces Formation? Even a spider's crawl is more pleasant to look at! The first few steps were still adequately performed, but what were those steps at the end? You stay here, and do it once through from beginning to end. If you make a mistake again, I'll break your damn legs!"

Frightened into extreme wariness, in a manner reminiscent of a baby learning how to walk, Zhang Chengling deeply contemplated each step before he lifted his leg. He was treading more carefully than the crippled old granny, as if he was terrified of stepping on and killing even one ant on the ground. From time to time, he still had to sneak a peek at Zhou Zishu, constantly worried that Zhou Zishu would give him trouble all of a sudden and really break his damn legs.

Zhou Zishu sat down, brooding that this little thing was certainly useless. His chest still felt tight; momentarily unable to hold it back, he turned his head aside and started coughing. An ominous trace of a flush surfaced on his pale side profile. Under the moonlight, it looked rather frightening in its severity.

At this moment, he felt a warmth on his back. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Wen Kexing, who had appeared sometime ago without him noticing, standing behind him and settling an overcoat on him. Silently, he sat beside Zhou Zishu, and after a while, asked out of the blue, "Does it hurt?"

Zhou Zishu scoffed. "How about you give it a try too?"

Abruptly, Wen Kexing stretched his hand out to test the waters, gently brushing open the front of his robes. For some unknown reason, Zhou Zishu did not duck away, but sat there, the flask with half the wine remaining in it still dangling from his hand. Wen Kexing took in the sight of his chest, which was as skeletal as his fingers were, and the topmost nail hammered into it. The light in his eyes flickered. Then, he drew in a sudden, deep breath of air, and refastened Zhou Zishu's robes.

The two of them sat shoulder to shoulder, but had no words for each other at this moment.

A while later, Wen Kexing finally asked, "I say, after spending so much effort all these years, I've finally found this one person that I have affinity with and is to my liking. Can you not die on me?"

Zhou Zishu asked in reply, "Is that something I have a say in?"

Wen Kexing did not say anything else. Suddenly sighing, he moved his gaze away from Zhou Zishu as though he did not wish to see him any longer, and fixed his eyes on Zhang Chengling, who was wobbling in the courtyard like an infant learning how

to walk. Casually picking up a few pebbles from the ground, he flicked one out, hitting Zhang Chengling right on his bottom, and said, "Little tyke, what they call martial lightness of the body all comes down to one word: speed. You're over there taking your own time like you're embroidering flowers, is that practicing qinggong? The steps and all that are superficial--even a spirit possession dancer might still have steps to follow. Even if you do not make a single misstep, is there any use in doing it so slowly?"

Zhang Chengling looked at the two of them, feeling very wronged. He discovered that not only did these two differ in their opinions on practicing qi, they also had differed in the ways they taught qinggong; there was simply no way for him to keep living.

To one side, Wen Kexing kept nagging "You have to be quick", while casting the pebbles at him in pursuit. Although Zhou Zishu did not speak, his gaze did not leave Zhang Chengling's feet a single inch, as he predatorily waited for him to slip up so that he could have an excuse to break his legs--

This one night could not have been more nerve-wracking.

Zhang Chengling sighed quietly in his heart, and suddenly recalled that his dream all along had not been to become some peerless master. If it had not been for the sudden tragedy of the Zhang family, he, in truth, had only wanted to open a dessert shop in the future, earn enough to feed his family, perform his filial duties, and busy himself with harmoniously welcoming and sending people off each day.

He had never dared to speak of this dream. Now, he was terrified of even thinking of it alone.

At dawn of the second day, after Ye Baiyi had eaten eight steamers of buns and downed two enormous bowls of congee without pause, and just as Zhou Zishu and the other two were preparing to move to another table, he finally announced that he was bringing them into the mountains today--he had thought of a way to break the formation surrounding the Puppet Manor.

Chapter 46 - Misfortune

Trailing behind Ye Baiyi, the few of them circled around within the mountain range, wandering, until they ventured into a patch of woods. Upon entering the woods, Zhou Zishu's whole body tensed inexplicably--he could not put his finger on what hidden treachery was present in this forest, but he instinctively sensed a hint of danger.

Wen Kexing, who had been annoyingly loud this whole journey, shut his mouth at this moment as well. Even Ye Baiyi's expression grew serious; he stopped every now and then, extremely cautious.

Zhang Chengling was the only one who was still unaware of what was going on. He was celebrating internally, because it looked like he could take a day off today. One of his shifu's hands was pulling at his arm--those fingers were long and slender but strong, and Zhang Chengling could almost feel the heat of his palm through the thick cotton of his sleeve. It provided a great sense of security, and Zhang Chengling obediently let himself be led, quietly overjoyed.

Ye Baiyi kept muttering something, and had to stop occasionally to write some calculations on the ground with a small branch. At first, Wen Kexing, very interested in what he was doing, stood beside him and watched for a while, but soon felt like his brain was turning into mush. Dizzied by his own incomprehension, he silently retreated to one side to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Zhou Zishu, and asked him a low voice, "Aren't you going to look at what he's doing?"

Knowing his own shortcomings well, Zhou Zishu replied, "What for? I won't understand it anyway."

Still, he frowned lightly, and too lowered his voice to ask Wen Kexing, "Rationally speaking...among the people I sent here, there were also experts on trap mechanisms and the art of the vanishing door. Why was not a single one of them able to find that Puppet Manor?"

Wen Kexing casually asked, "Didn't you say that someone drew a map?"

Zhou Zishu replied, "Yes, he did. When he took the map he drew and brought people on a second trip to find it once more, not a single one returned."

Wen Kexing cast a grave look at Ye Baiyi's squatting figure, and lowered his voice even more. "If even...have perished here, do you think that this old glutton is reliable?"

Zhou Zishu was about to speak, but before he could even make a sound, Ye Baiyi had stood up and turned his head back at them, saying coldly, "The rest of this journey is treacherous. If you don't wish to die, step in my footprints."

Zhou Zishu scratched his nose. Ye Baiyi cast a look at him and scoffed. “An expert in the art of the vanishing door? If their leader is already this incapable, can his subordinates not be rice bins?¹²⁹”

He turned and walked off immediately once he was done speaking.

"The facial expressions of those three which included Zhou Zishu were very odd-- anyone who had witnessed Old Senior Ye's appetite with their own eyes, and then heard him call someone a “rice bin” with their own ears would have an odd expression on their face as well.

However, odd expressions were one matter; apart from Zhang Chengling, neither of these two adults were people who could not discern what was important from the trivial, and they immediately followed Ye Baiyi. Zhang Chengling glimpsed that there were more and more carcasses of various animals by the roadside, and felt that this place was gloomy and sinister. After walking for a while, he even saw a few sets of human bones, with the heads all separated from the bodies. They looked very terrifying, and, trembling, he asked Zhou Zishu, “Shifu, the person we’re looking for, why does he want to live in a place like this?”

Zhou Zishu turned his head to the side to glance at him, and said, “How would I know? In a vast jungle, there will be birds of any kind.”

Zhang Chengling carefully stepped over a segment of human femur, and could not help but ask, “He lives somewhere so isolated, and created so many traps that every step he takes is heart-pounding. What if he gets lost too when he makes a trip out of here? Isn’t this like putting a mousetrap under your own bed?”

Finding his words strange, Zhou Zishu questioned, “Putting a mousetrap under your own bed?”

Zhang Chengling said, “One time, when I was a kid, mice got into my room. I couldn't catch them no matter what I tried, so I put two mousetraps under my bed and went to sleep. But I forgot all about them the next morning, stepped on the traps, and got my toes fractured by the mousetraps.”

Wen Kexing heard this, and a ‘pfft’ of laughter escaped him. Zhou Zishu sighed; spotting that Zhang Chengling had nearly taken a wrong step because he was focused on talking, he picked him up and reprimanded, “Shut up and watch your step, do you want to die?”

¹²⁹ Describes someone useless, but also used to describe someone who eats a lot

Zhang Chengling stuck his tongue out,¹³⁰ and Zhou Zishu said coolly, “Don’t measure others by your own behaviour--in this world, how are there that many people who are as stupid as you are?”

Wen Kexing picked up the topic of conversation, gently and patiently explaining to Zhang Chengling, “There is actually no more than that small handful of reasons as to why a person would want to hide himself. Either this person suspects that there are enemies out to kill him and feels like he has no other choice but to conceal himself in a place where no one can find him in...”

Zhou Zishu cut in sharply, “Like the Ghost Valley?”

Wen Kexing glanced at him and said, “If you want to put it that way...it’s also correct.”

Zhou Zishu took the chance to question, “So, what sin unforgivable by the heavens and commonfolk did the Valley Master commit back then, to have no other choice but to hide in the Ghost Valley?”

Wen Kexing did not mind his opportunistic interrogation, and simply replied unabashedly, “Me? I, naturally, was a more special case. I didn’t commit any crime, and simply entered it cluelessly. Until now, I don’t understand how such a good person as I am has coexisted with evil ghosts for so many years. I am truly the unsullied flower that remains pure despite having grown amidst mud, shining with a chaste beauty after clear water washes me clean.”

Zhou Zishu smiled without saying anything, treating whatever he said entirely as bullshit.

Wen Kexing sighed. “A-Xu, you really wound my heart--little tyke, do you think I’m a good person?”

He had a good temperament, was highly skilled at martial arts, and even told stories--Zhang Chengling was in such awe of this senior that he was nearly prostrating himself in reverence. Upon hearing this question, he instantly nodded, bobbing his head in a manner reminiscent of a knife dicing garlic.

Wen Kexing was extremely moved. He patted Zhang Chengling’s head and sighed, “The child is still the best: he has a conscience and can differentiate between good and evil, he’ll remember it when people treat him well, unlike a certain person...sigh!”

¹³⁰ Kind of different from the Western usage--here, he’s most probably doing it like “oops, I nearly screwed up”.

Zhou Zishu did not speak--they were all leaders, but those like Gao Chong who led a bunch of people who thought of themselves as the orthodox, or those like himself who led a group of assassins and spies, were different from the Master of the Ghost Valley. Gao Chong only needed to employ the few words “The righteous cause for all under heaven” and those people would trap themselves by operating within certain boundaries of their own accord. On the other hand, those in “Tian Chuang” basically joined to sell their lives to him, and to the Emperor. Behind that organisation was rigorous and immense sovereign power, and from its establishment till today, other than himself, no one else had dared to challenge it.

But the Ghost Valley was different, because within the Ghost Valley was a bunch of fugitives.

They were like a swarm of the wickedest venomous insects that had been sealed in a narrow, cramped container, where massacring one another was the only way to keep surviving. It was a place of a million evil souls; only when one died, could the other live. There were no morals, and no axioms; there was only the survival of the fittest, and only the one mighty and vicious enough to devour them all--that insect which became the king of poisons¹³¹--could come out into the daylight again.

Wen Kexing disguised himself too well; many times, even Zhou Zishu would mistake him for just an ordinary, talkative man.

To the side, Wen Kexing continued telling Zhang Chengling, “Other than the fear of being hunted down, there’s another reason that makes someone hide from others, and it is sadness. In his heart, he knows that he will not be able to lay eyes on the person he wants to see most ever again, so he might as well bury himself in this place. After a long time, he can comfort himself by saying, the only reason why he didn’t come look for me is because he has not been able to find me, and nothing more.”

He exhaled a light sigh, and continued, “If your shifu’s no longer around in the future, who knows, I might want to find a place like this to hide away in. Otherwise, if I go out and see beautiful people milling about the streets, and yet can never find that one beauty who’s the best fit for what my heart desires, won’t I be very sad?”

Zhou Zishu teased, “I thought you said you intended to live and die with me.”

Wen Kexing chuckled as well. “I said so, but you don’t believe it.”

To the side, Zhang Chengling chimed in, “Just like...just like Yu Boya destroying his qin?¹³²”

¹³¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu_\(poison\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu_(poison)) Wen Kexing is that surviving worm.

¹³² The same tale that coined the term 知音 (soulmate/lit. one who knows your song): while playing his own composition High Mountains and Running River, Yu Boya met a woodcutter, who instinctively understood his music. After this woodcutter

The expressions of the two men blanked at the same time. Zhang Chengling looked at this one, then looked at the other one, not knowing what he had said wrong. A while later, he finally heard Wen Kexing say softly, "No one else in this world understands High Mountains and Running River, to put it that way, it's correct...but also incorrect."

He looked at Zhou Zishu, but Zhou Zishu avoided his gaze. Wen Kexing did not say anything else, and continued to follow close on Ye Baiyi's heels.

All of a sudden, Ye Baiyi's footsteps faltered. He stopped walking, listening intently in silence, raised a palm to halt them in their tracks and commanded in a low voice, "Be silent."

The hand which Zhou Zishu was grabbing Zhang Chengling with suddenly tightened. Thereafter, the few of them lowered their heads at the same time, sensing that the ground beneath their feet seemed to be shaking. An unknown buzzing sounded, and Wen Kexing immediately shot Zhou Zishu a melancholic look that said "I told you that this glutton was unreliable, but you didn't believe me". However, Zhou Zishu did not have the time to care about him, because at the next moment, a strong surge of energy burst forth from beneath the ground. As if it was going to split, the earth quaked vigorously. The few of them leapt into the air together.

Keeping his hold on Zhang Chengling, Zhou Zishu lightly pushed at a small branch split from the arm of a large tree with his foot to gain momentum, but as though it was fake, that branch immediately snapped once Zhou Zishu tapped it and fell straight down. Silently aghast, Zhou Zishu whirled in the air, hooking the tip of his shoe around the tree trunk. Yet, in the blink of an eye, that great tree also toppled with a crash.

Zhang Chengling buried his face in Zhou Zishu's chest, suddenly recalling an idiom that his tutor had taught him when he was younger--depend on the mountain, and the mountain will collapse; depend on the tree, and the tree will shake.

So it was true...indeed, if one did not listen to the advice of his elders, the miseries he suffered were as innumerable as money spent freely.¹³³

The land collapsed; it was like an ominous mouth had gaped in the ground, about to swallow everyone. At the last moment, Zhou Zishu borrowed momentum from the huge tree that had collapsed, and glided out about four to five zhang away. Right as he

died, he played the same piece by his grave, and smashed his qin on the ground because there would never be another person who shared the same understanding of him and his music.

¹³³ The original quote is 不听老人言，吃亏在眼前: If you do not listen to the advice of your elders, the mishap is right before you.

had just gotten his feet under him, even before he had the time to exhale a breath, his brow furrowed tightly--in the blink of an eye, Wen Kexing and Ye Baiyi had disappeared!

Then there was a sudden nothingness beneath his feet, and he plummeted downwards. Instantly, Zhou Zishu understood why they had all vanished, and in the split-second, he only had time to shield Zhang Chengling with his embrace, the pitch darkness all around him. As if it were alive, the spot where he had missed a step earlier sealed itself back up unnoticed.

He did not know how deep this pit was--Zhou Zishu silently questioned, did this not mean that they were falling to their deaths? Thus he abruptly gathered his qi, and slapped his palm on the rock wall diagonally downwards from them. Using an unknown amount of force, he smashed a crater into the rock wall. Chunks of rock and dirt went flying, but the speed at which they were falling was reduced by quite a bit. Zhou Zishu took this opportunity to kick the wall lightly, demonstrating his expert mastery of that qinggong which left not a single trace.

Except that his figure jerked to a halt for a second, like it had stuck itself to the wall; ultimately, he had overestimated himself a little, and forgotten that his martial ability was long incomparable to what it used to be. Combined with carrying such a big lad like Zhang Chengling, this single strike caused his internal qi to stagnate where it was vital. Not good, Zhou Zishu inwardly thought, but glimpsed the rock wall which he had smashed in quake once again. Before he could react, a sharp blade popped out of a crack in the rock wall, and nearly speared the two of them like candied hawthorns on a stick.

The two people suffered a fright; with no other choice, Zhou Zishu could only withdraw the force he exerted on his leg, and let them continue falling.

Luckily, they were already nearing the bottom at this instant. Zhou Zishu landed on his feet and let go of Zhang Chengling. Thankfully, the small luminescent pearl¹³⁴ he had used to illuminate their surroundings when he had fallen into the underground cave with Wen Kexing that time was still on him, and although there was only a weak glow, it was enough for him to see. Zhou Zishu did not know how he had so much affinity for tunnels; he thought, could it be that his luck in life clashed with that of a gopher?¹³⁵

At this moment, Zhang Chengling piped up in a small voice, “Shifu...”

¹³⁴ 夜明珠: Literally ‘glowing night pearl’, it’s this stone that glows in the dark. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%A4%9C%E6%98%8E%E7%8F%A0/6149>

¹³⁵ 命犯: In fengshui, if you 命犯 a certain thing, it means that it brings (usually negative) consequences into your life. You’re usually born with it (ie. the time at which you were born determines what you 命犯)

Zhou Zishu shushed him and whispered in reply, “Don’t make a sound.”

But Zhang Chengling was so frightened that even his voice had changed pitch. “No...shifu, look...”

This time round, he did not need Zhang Chengling to point it out. Zhou Zishu had seen it too--in this narrow, cramped stone chamber, not far away from them, there were two glowing eyes looking back at them.

Zhou Zishu raised the luminescent pearl, and clearly made out the entirety of that thing--it was a gigantic python as thick as a man’s waist, flicking its forked tongue as it stared at them predatorily.

Fortuitous events did not come in pairs, and trouble never travelled alone; Zhou Zishu wet his lips, and at this moment, deeply understood what was meant by the ability to even get cool water stuck between one's teeth when drinking.¹³⁶

For some unknown reason, when frightened to the core, Zhang Chengling talked more instead, nattering endlessly by his ear, “Shi...shifu, I...I heard that pythons move very swiftly, it’s impossible for an ordinary person to dodge. It...it probably has bad teeth, before it eats people, it always has to flatten them by squeezing them, once...once targeted by an python, the person will be strangled to death, and all their bones will be crushed, their intestines squished into a ball, turning into a sack of only skin and nothing else,¹³⁷ and then when it feels like it’s finally easily digestible, it’ll swallow the person whole...”

Zhou Zishu reached out and pressed a hand on the flexible Baiyi sword at his waist, grinding his teeth together as he uttered, “Shut, up!”

Then, amidst Zhang Chengling’s desolate howling, that python raised its head and swiftly struck at them.

¹³⁶ 喝凉水也会塞牙: Usually, water doesn’t get stuck between your teeth when you drink it. Describes someone having absolutely rotten luck.

¹³⁷ Zhang Chengling says 面口袋 here, which can mean either a flour sack (the more common usage) or a pocket sandwich kind of pastry (a more anachronistic usage)

Chapter 47 - Puppet

The python was even taller than Zhou Zishu when it rose to full height. Opening its maw, it swooped in to bite Zhou Zishu's throat. Flinging Zhang Chengling into a corner, Zhou Zishu bent and ducked, unsheathed the Baiyi sword in the same instant, and brought it down onto the back of this beast's neck.

When Baiyi's blade collided with that great snake's skin, sparks of friction seemed to fly; the skin on the python's neck was not broken in the slightest. Its tail flicked, and barely missed Zhou Zishu's shoulder as it passed. Had Zhou Zishu not dodged quickly enough, this one move could have broken his neck. With a thump, the snake's tail landed on the ground, stirring up a cloud of dust and debris.

Zhou Zishu retreated three steps in succession, his heart growing cold. He knew that if it had not been Baiyi, but any ordinary sword in his hand, it would have been snapped by this single strike.

Instantly, he sensed that something was amiss, and a thought suddenly flashed through his mind--when that python had opened its maw and struck out at him, he had not smelled the stench of blood! These animals ate their prey raw, with fur and blood whole, all year round. How could it not have the stench of blood in its mouth?

Curled up in a ball but with his neck outstretched, Zhang Chengling observed it closely for a while, before he suddenly exclaimed, "Shifu, this looks like an artificial snake!"

It would have been alright if he had only spoken; that great snake jerked with vigour, arched its neck, and turned towards him, hissing. But Zhang Chengling did not seem as scared as he had been earlier, and dumbly jumped from the ground to his feet. Not forgetting to dust his pants off as he pointed at that python, which was staring predatorily at him and ready to take a bite out of him, he said, "Shifu, look, this snake looks so real..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the python had already struck out at him.

Earlier, Zhang Chengling was terrified, but upon taking a look and realising it was fake now, he started to become negligent, as if he felt that since an artificial snake did not have to eat people, there was no danger. Zhou Zishu did not know what to tell him--was there actually any difference between the snake turning him into a sack, and swallowing him after he had been turned into a sack?

But Zhou Zishu could not simply stand aside and watch, as Zhang Chengling was about to lose his puny life. He jumped from the flat ground, leaping at the side of the snake's head with his arms outstretched on either side of him like wings, and knocked the snake's head askew with a single kick. That snake, made of some unknown material, was astonishingly sturdy beyond all comparison.

Upon landing, Zhou Zishu felt his calf start to vaguely hurt.

This time round, Zhang Chengling did not dare to say anything.

In the instant that Zhou Zishu had landed, he had glimpsed a dark passageway behind the python's body. An idea had formed in his mind. Now, he instructed Zhang Chengling in a quiet voice, "A while later, I'll distract it. You'll run towards the cave over there, but don't enter it. Wait for me by the entrance, do you hear?"

Zhang Chengling nodded his head obediently.

The great snake shook its head, as if it had gotten its bearings back. Zhou Zishu shoved Zhang Chengling hard. "Go!"

Closing his eyes, Zhang Chengling charged forwards like a headless housefly. Almost like he was demonstrating how mice scuttled, he nearly bumped right into the python. Heart palpitating, Zhou Zishu hastily thrust his sword. It struck the python in those eyes made of some unknown material and gouged one out. Unable to concern itself with Zhang Chengling for the moment, the great python sprung forward to battle Zhou Zishu to the death--of course, since it was not alive in the first place, it was difficult for it to die another time.

Zhou Zishu climbed upwards along the rock wall, sucked in a sudden breath, and leapt two, three zhang higher. That python chased after him in relentless pursuit. Out of the corner of his eye, Zhou Zishu glimpsed that Zhang Chengling had made it to the entrance of the cave and was looking in his direction with a face full of anxiety. Letting go of his worry, he kicked off from the rock wall hard, flipping through the air over to him. His body bent like he had been snapped into two, and he dived headfirst into that narrow, cramped space.

No matter how intricately it had been constructed, that artificial python was still a puppet. It followed him over, but that space was truly too narrow, and its waist--which could even break a sword--was not as flexible as Zhou Zishu's.

There was a "crack" in mid-air. Zhou Zishu landed, rolling to the side once he touched the ground--but he had worried unnecessarily, since that snake had only been shortened by half a segment. The half that was still connected was wedged in the narrow entrance, and its giant tail, wiggling in mid-air, looked slightly comical.

Zhang Chengling instantly sprung at him. "Shifu, you haven't been injured, have you?"

Zhou Zishu looked at him without saying anything. Zhang Chengling was extremely worried, his eyes blinking. If it weren't for the fact that his shifu's authority

was too mighty most of the time, Zhang Chengling would have pounced on him and felt him up and down to ensure that he wasn't missing any parts.

Zhou Zishu sighed, and slapped him on the back of his skull, saying. "Internal injury--and that's also caused by how you've angered me. Follow closely behind me."

Zhang Chengling bobbed his head, and cautiously followed him into the entrance that the great snake had been guarding.

This was a very narrow segment of corridor with a door ahead of them. Zhou Zishu stopped at the door, stretching out an arm to halt Zhang Chengling in his tracks, and instructed him in a low voice, "Stand close to the wall, to one side."--In such a narrow space, if there was indeed a hidden mechanism that sprung out once he pushed open the door, it would be truly unavoidable.

Zhou Zishu hesitated for a moment, and to err on the side of caution, he instructed Zhang Chengling again, "Hold your breath."

Then he nudged open the small door with the greatest caution. The hinges squeaked, dust cascaded, and Zhou Zishu's entire body tensed, but nothing happened at all.

He raised the luminescent pearl in his hand and gazed out, and saw that it was a small stone chamber shrouded entirely in dust. Two people stood in the corner, but they were not moving in the slightest. Zhou Zishu grabbed the front of Zhang Chengling's robes and carefully edged closer to those two, just to discover when he neared that they were not people, but two human-like puppets.

They were about the size of actual humans and took the forms of a man and a woman. They had been constructed with precise detail down to every hair, and looked like they were alive: their eyes were gazing at the door, as if they were really eying these two trespassers.

Zhou Zishu frowned; no wonder this place was named Puppet Manor. This manor did not seem to have any sign of life, and had odd-looking puppets everywhere. With the prior lesson of the artificial snake, Zhou Zishu did not dare to be careless. Observing the joints of the puppets, he noted that they looked more flexible than that great snake's. He was probably unable to reuse his old tricks. In a low voice, he told Zhang Chengling, "Walk ahead of me, slowly."

Following his instructions, Zhang Chengling trod on cautiously as Zhou Zishu walked backwards with his back against Zhang Chengling's, his eyes never leaving those two puppets even for a single second.

At the other end of the stone chamber, Zhang Chengling whispered, "Shifu, there's a door ahead."

Upon hearing this, Zhou Zishu held his sword horizontally in front of himself, told Zhang Chengling to make way, turned and pushed open that small, well-aged door. Before him was another corridor, the end too far away to be in sight. Zhou Zishu said in a low voice, "Let's move."

The two people entered the corridor one after the other. Before they left, Zhou Zishu hesitated for a second--those two puppets were like any other puppets in the world, lifeless and unable to move. Yet, for some unknown reason, he felt the hairs on his back stand on end, and reflexively closed the small door behind them, latching it shut.

Thus, he did not see that in the instant he closed the door, the eyes of the two puppets in the stone chamber darted at the same time, as if chasing after his retreating figure.

This tiny passageway seemed to throw sounds around; their footsteps echoed, making the place appear especially lonely and desolate, but also especially sinister and gloomy. Abruptly, inexplicably, Zhang Chengling's goosebumps rose all over his body. He piped up quietly, "Shifu, I'm...I'm a little scared."

He regretted his words the moment they left his mouth, thinking that Zhou Zishu was going to reprimand him. Yet, Zhou Zishu lifted a casual hand and placed his palm on his shoulder. His hand was so thin, but so warm; Zhang Chengling turned his head to the side, and by the weak light of the luminescent pearl, saw Zhou Zishu's side profile. It put his heart at ease.

It was unknown how long the stone corridor was; just when Zhou Zishu was running out of patience, they finally reached the end of it. Zhou Zishu thought to himself that he did not know where Ye Baiyi and Wen Kexing had gone earlier, but he was not particularly worried either. If there were people who could survive even when the sky came crashing down and the ground collapsed, it would be those two. Rather, it was slightly more tough for himself, who was bringing Zhang Chengling, this little rascal who only made trouble at critical moments, along with him.

At the end of the stone corridor was another door. This time, it was an enormous door; it was like his visual field had suddenly been broadened. Zhou Zishu yanked Zhang Chengling behind him and pushed the door open--it looked to be a great hall, an empty great hall with not a single thing in it at all. Zhou Zishu's gaze drifted downwards, and he noticed that the ground was in fact a dark grey colour.

Zhang Chengling stuck his head out to peer over his side, looking at his shifu with a questioning gaze, not knowing why Zhou Zishu stopped here.

Accustomed to operating cautiously, Zhou Zishu extracted a silver crumb from his robes and flicked it out. The silver crumb landed on the dark grey ground, rolled

twice, and nothing happened--he let down his guard slightly, but right at this moment, a drop of water fell from the ceiling. Under the surveillance of two pairs of eyes, that drop of water landed right on the silver he had thrown out, and thereafter, dissolved where it was on the ground!

Then, something even more terrifying occurred--drop by drop, that corrosive water touched down on different spots, growing more and more concentrated, until it looked like it had started to rain.

Zhou Zishu understood then why the ground was that sort of ominous dark grey colour. If a person was doused by this sort of fatal rainwater, even their bones would be reduced to ashes.

His heart sank--in this world, there were qinggong techniques one could use to traverse snow without leaving a mark, but there were definitely none a person could use to drift through rain and not have a single drop touch him.

Zhou Zishu took a step back, and said, "This road is impassable. We're turning back."

They had just turned around when they heard another set of footsteps coming from the long stone corridor.

Tap——tap——tap——

Zhang Chengling was nearly clinging to Zhou Zishu with his whole body as he stammered, "Shishishishi...shifu, is...is this a haunting?"

Zhou Zishu raised a finger, signalling him to shut his mouth. Turning to Zhang Chengling, he said, "Close that door, in case we accidentally enter it again. Quickly do so, then hide by the door, and don't make a sound."

Zhang Chengling instantly did as he instructed. Those footsteps were getting quicker and quicker, more and more tightly clustered, eventually morphing from a sedate walk into a mad sprint. All of a sudden, there was no sound at all. The light of the luminescent pearl could only illuminate a small patch of ground in front of him, so Zhou Zishu had no other choice but to concentrate and prick up his ears. However, in this cramped stone corridor, other than Zhang Chengling, he could not hear a second person breathing.

A flash of light sliced through the darkness. Reflexively, Zhou Zishu raised his Baiyi sword to parry. His opponent's heavy sword slammed down, the force of it jarring the juncture of his thumb and forefinger numb. In the split-second, Zhou Zishu caught a clear glimpse of who the other person was, and cold sweat poured down his back--that person who was swinging the heavy sword in his hand at him was none other than the male puppet in that small stone chamber earlier.

Zhou Zishu's mind whirred at high speed. Instantly, he realised that the person who had designed this place had a devious mind: if they had triggered a mechanism in the small stone chamber just now, the designer feared that he would immediately retreat with Zhang Chengling in tow. That area was vast and empty, and there was no doubt that the puppets could not perform qinggong. Even though it would have been tough, to an expert who could handle the artificial python, it would not have been a hopeless situation.

It was as though the designer had predicted it exactly. All he had to do was to lead them into this hopeless situation where they could not advance even one step. In this cramped corridor, even if one had godly, world-shaking martial prowess, it was difficult to fully utilise it; his aim was to block off all the avenues available to a person.

Zhou Zishu inwardly bemoaned the situation, withdrew his strength and then slashed forward. Baiyi's blade collided with the puppet's arm, but it could not make a dent--whether it was made of the same material as that great snake had been or not, the puppet was undoubtedly just as tough. Without waiting for Zhou Zishu to react, that puppet mechanically swung its sword at him again.

Zhou Zishu timed it exactly right, made a light sound of exertion, and executed a brilliant maneuver. Gracefully, Baiyi twirled in a dexterous flip, blade parrying blade. Exerting great strength, he channelled his continuous flow of internal energy onto the hallowed weapon, and cleaved the heavy sword in that puppet's hand right into two.

Zhang Chengling had never seen this level of technique before, and held his breath as he fixed his eyes on it.

However, that puppet did not care at all. His fingers opened mechanically to abandon his heavy sword, and then he swung his arm over--he did not fear pain or death, his whole body available for use as a weapon. Mind boggling at this situation, Zhou Zishu grabbed that arm swinging at him. If it were a normal person, their arm would have been dislocated by Zhou Zishu's single tug, but this puppet was extremely sturdy. Instead, it pushed at Zhou Zishu, forcing him to retreat until his back was pressed up against the door to that stone chamber behind him.

Zhou Zishu withdrew his hand and shrunk back. With a boom, the puppet had punched a huge hole in the door. He could not have been more thankful that he had prepared for any future problems earlier and told Zhang Chengling to close this door, but at the next moment, he could no longer bring himself to rejoice--behind this male puppet, he saw a female puppet. This thing looked like she was unable to turn, and could only walk forward.

So she walked forward, gliding directly towards Zhang Chengling, who had retreated to the other corner earlier in order to get out of Zhou Zishu and the male puppet's way.

Alarmed, Zhou Zishu ducked the horizontal arc of the male puppet's arm, and threw himself at Zhang Chengling. The female puppet appeared to be moving faster than he was; he had only just managed to shield Zhang Chengling when the long flute¹³⁸ in the puppet's hand swept towards him like a stick. The place was too small, and with no way to avoid the blow, Zhou Zishu absorbed the brunt of it with his back, instantly coughing up a mouthful of blood.

Arms braced against the wall, the fresh blood in his mouth dripped onto Zhang Chengling's shoulder. His body pitched forward involuntarily and nearly squashed that youth underneath him. At this point in time, Zhang Chengling ignored his own fear, and hurriedly extended his hands to support him. Pressing Zhang Chengling down, Zhou Zishu laboriously dodged to the side, and the female puppet's second strike zoomed past his head, narrowly missing his scalp.

His Baiyi nearly slipped out of his hand. The seven Three-Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupuncture in his chest tremored violently, and his vision went momentarily black.

Zhang Chengling raged, "You dare to hurt my shifu? I'll fight you!"

He threw himself at that puppet without care. This tyke was always timid when he should have been daring, but daring when he should have been timid; Zhou Zishu was a beat too late to hold him back, and watched as Zhang Chengling ferociously leapt at that aloof female puppet. Unarmed, it was as if he was going to bite her with his teeth.

"Little tyke..." Zhou Zishu wanted to say something, but his own blood choked him once he opened his mouth and he could not stop coughing.

Right at this instant, the wall of the stone corridor next to the female puppet suddenly toppled with a crash. Unable to dodge in time, the female puppet was crushed underneath it, still waving the metal flute around in hand. A hopelessly dishevelled person barged in coughing, dusting himself off as he said, "What is this godforsaken pla...A-Xu!"

Zhou Zishu let out a breath of relief, and very nearly failed to inhale the next breath. This was the first time in his life that he was this glad to see Wen Kexing.

¹³⁸ It's a 箫, you know, the one Lan Xichen plays.

Chapter 48 - A Treacherous Situation

On the ground, that female puppet was still extending her leg; at first, Wen Kexing did not notice it and nearly stepped onto it, only leaping away when the flute sticking close to the floor swept at him. Behind him, the male puppet had already extracted its arm from the doorway and was turning in this direction. Wen Kexing picked Zhang Chengling up, flung him into the hole in the wall with a whirl of his arm, then bent to pick up Zhou Zishu in a bridal carry and jumped in close behind.

The male puppet ran over to where they were. Wen Kexing turned, eyeing that puppet guardedly, but that puppet seemed to be capable of moving in only two directions: it could only either advance or retreat, and did not have the ability to turn left or right. Unable to locate the humans, it kept turning in circles on the spot. The long flute in the female puppet's hand landed a blow on his leg, and like the sharpest spear turned onto the most durable shield, they instantly came into conflict. With a loud crash, the two puppets toppled onto their fronts. On the receiving end of an attack, the male puppet jabbed at the female puppet's head with his elbow, and then they started massacring each other in internal strife.

Wen Kexing finally heaved a sigh of relief, and instructed Zhou Zishu in a low voice, "Don't talk." He sealed a few of Zhou Zishu's acupoints and set him down, frowning when he saw the bloodstains on his front. He told Zhang Chengling, "Little tyke, go over to that opening and take a look, if there's some kind of..."

He paused, not knowing how to describe it. Gesturing with his hands, he said, "Round, ball-like thing about a foot tall rolling towards you, run. Come back and tell me about it."

Zhang Chengling made a noise of understanding, and asked, "Senior, my shifu, he..."

For once, Wen Kexing was annoyed, and cut him off abruptly, "He's fine, he won't die."

Zhang Chengling asked, "Senior, that thing you described, what is it?"

"I don't know either," Wen Kexing sighed, and pointed at the segment of wall that had been blasted open. "That's the result of that thing exploding."

Zhang Chengling looked in the direction his finger was pointing in, and was instantly troubled. Realising that this senior, who appeared very capable, had also been pursued to this location, he immediately ran to the other end without a single word and nervously stood guard there.

Wen Kexing reached out to open Zhou Zishu's robes, but his wrist was pinned by the latter. In a hoarse voice, Zhou Zishu laughed, "What are you doing? Taking advantage of me when it's opportune?"

Wen Kexing slapped his hand away. Poking him lightly in the chest, he said coolly, "Talk a couple of lines less. You're about to kick the bucket, and you're still so talkative."

Zhou Zishu felt like he had come full circle in his life: he had just been called a rice bin by a glutton, and now, a chatterbox was claiming that he was talkative.

Wen Kexing gingerly unfastened his robe. When his gaze lighted upon the nails in Zhou Zishu's chest, the light in his eyes unconsciously flickered. On the other hand, Zhou Zishu did not care at all. In between breaths, his chest and back felt like they were on fire. At once, he knew that the damage he had suffered was not superficial; he had most likely broken a bone and hurt his lungs. Forcing himself to hold back his coughing, he made himself take extremely shallow breaths, in case he aggravated his injury.

Wen Kexing flipped him over, saw the injury on his back, and could not help but suck in a breath. Frostily, he said, "An inch more to the side, and that thing could have broken your spine, do you believe it?"

Voice as thin as a thread, Zhou Zishu said, "Don't talk nonsense. If I could have my spine broken by a fake human being, I won't have the face to continue living."

Wen Kexing humphed. Placing his hand on his back, he examined his injury closely. A while later, he sighed. "Are you stupid? Didn't think that it would hurt?"

His fingers pressed down on a spot, and Zhou Zishu let out a low grunt at once, in too much pain to speak. After a while, he finally replied through gritted teeth, "Why...don't you ask me to hit you with a stick, and give it a try yourself..."

Wen Kexing fell into one of his rare bouts of silence. He helped Zhou Zishu to sit up straight, laid his hand against his back, and channelled true qi over to him. He did not dare to use too much force, out of fear that he might rattle the nails in his chest like how Ye Baiyi had the other time.

In his whole life, Wen Kexing had practiced martial arts with the purpose of killing and hurting; this was the first time he was using it so meticulously and carefully to try and save someone. He was as tense as a boorish butcher doing delicate needlework, and not long later, sweat began beading at the sides of his forehead.

Slightly less than half a shichen later, he retracted his qi and let go of Zhou Zishu, positioning him so that his shoulder was leaning against the wall. Knowing that his own physical strength was now limited, Zhou Zishu did not waste more of it and

simply closed his eyes to rest. The bit of blood at the corner of this mouth had not been wiped clean, and its presence made that pale face look even more shockingly ashen in contrast.

Wen Kexing gazed at him for a while. Suddenly, he couldn't stop himself from bending down to lightly take the corner of Zhou Zishu's mouth between his lips, and lap up the drop of blood that had landed there. He seemed to exhale a sigh as he sunk his fingers into the hair at Zhou Zishu's temple, their breaths extremely close to each other's. Zhou Zishu had opened his eyes sometime ago, but he did not waste any energy by ducking away from Wen Kexing. Instead, he merely said in a low voice, "What lowlife manners, taking advantage of others' misfortune."

Wen Kexing did not even look up at him, and returned his compliment with an equally low voice, "Said as if you were a gentleman."

The way he smiled and spoke was like a murmur; Zhou Zishu could not maintain his pretense of calm any longer, and turned his face away with some discomfort. But his jaw was gripped in place by Wen Kexing, who asked, "Do you have a conscience? I healed your injury. Do I not get even this little perk?"

Zhou Zishu was silent for a while, before he finally said, "I don't have plans to sell my body for the moment."

Wen Kexing chuckled. "Do you know what happens when you're not as strong as someone?"

Zhou Zishu arched an eyebrow and stared at him like he was the pinnacle of human shamelessness. Wen Kexing drew close to his ear, and he heard him whisper, "I'll--force--a--transaction."

Zhou Zishu grimaced. "Your spirits are too high."

Wen Kexing fixed his eyes on him for a while, the meaning of his gaze unclear, before letting him go. Crossing his arms behind his head and stretching his legs to rest his feet on the wall on the other side, he laid down and said smugly, "But you can put it on your tab."

Fatigued, Zhou Zishu stopped talking nonsense with him. He closed his eyes and blearily passed out into sleep.

Wen Kexing knew his own limitations well. Other than Ye Baiyi, none of them understood this unfathomable witchcraft that was the art of the vanishing door, and they might come across unknown dangers if they stumbled around like headless houseflies. At present, Zhang Chengling was a little tyke who hadn't even matured enough to grow body hair, and Zhou Zishu was grievously injured. They might as

well adopt a tactic of countering infinite volatile changes with stagnancy; to rest and recover where they were, catch their breaths before thinking of a solution.

With how stifled it was, Zhou Zishu's breathing was very quiet, but yet very even, like he had fallen asleep. Wen Kexing turned his head over to gaze at him, and suddenly recalled the words of the Great Shaman of Nanjiang--"If you incapacitate yourself by ridding yourself of your martial ability, I might have a fifth of confidence that I can save your life." Involuntarily, he sat up straight, channelled his martial energy into his palm and raised it slowly. Maybe...

Just as his palm hovered in hesitation, a hand suddenly plunged out of thin air. Icy fingers came to rest on his wrist. Zhou Zishu had opened his eyes sometime ago, and their gazes met in this cramped space.

Zhou Zishu's gaze was very calm. Not a single fluctuation in tone could be detected in his voice as he asked, "What are you doing?"

Wen Kexing did not speak.

All of a sudden, Zhou Zishu sighed. Moving his gaze away, he said, almost in a non-sequitur, "Others don't understand, but do you not as well?"

Wen Kexing slowly dropped his gaze. A long while later, he gently let his palm fall to the side.

"Yes, I understand." As he spoke, he abruptly sent his arm downwards, and a solid depression half an inch deep in the shape of his hand was imprinted into the ground underneath his palm. Like he was trying hard to convince himself, he repeated once more, "I understand..."

Zhang Chengling did not know when he had fallen asleep, nor did he know how long he had slept for, but he was suddenly jolted into wakefulness by a great noise from not too far away. He jumped to his feet in an instant, turning his neck to warily scan all directions. Then, a hand pressed down on his shoulder. Zhang Chengling jolted, whipped his head back, and discovered that it was his shifu, who had not been able to even stand a day ago.

Zhou Zishu coughed twice, pressed Zhang Chengling still, and instructed, "Don't fidget. Follow us."

When Zhang Chengling turned his head, Wen Kexing had followed Zhou Zishu out. Zhang Chengling looked at one of them, then the other, and asked, "Shifu, has your injury healed?"

Zhou Zishu replied without even looking back at him. "Am I not human?"

Zhang Chengling thought about it. True, with an injury that severe--brushing off Zhou Zishu's unkind tone, he anxiously went up again to ask, "Then, shifu...are you able to walk on your own?"

Zhou Zishu inhaled deeply. It wasn't only his body which was hurting; he felt that his brain was also starting to ache, too. "What else do you think I'm doing?"

Wen Kexing turned his head aside to laugh. Zhang Chengling scratched his head and said, "Shifu, I mean...you're so severely injured..."

Zhou Zishu glanced at him expressionlessly. "Do you think I should be delicately frail for a moment in this godforsaken place? Unless you'd like to carry me on your back?"

Zhang Chengling was just about to demonstrate his sense of filial piety when Wen Kexing immediately spoke up. "I'll carry you on my back. Or in my arms, that's fine too."

Zhou Zishu turned his head aside to cough, pressed on the injury on his chest with his shoulders hunched, and said shortly, "Don't talk nonsense."

Making their way along the underground passage, the three of them cautiously neared the place where the gigantic crash had come from. For the sake of caution, Zhou Zishu wrapped his palm around the luminescent pearl, plunging their surroundings into darkness. Wen Kexing stepped forward to tug at Zhou Zishu, pulling him to one side. Reaching out, he took Zhou Zishu's Baiyi sword, and glided a finger along the blade. A hint of appreciation bloomed on his face. Then, with a quiver of his wrist, the tip of the sword trembled slightly, and the long sword was thrust out.

Blindsided, the person around the corner grunted, and extended a finger to flick the tip of his sword off-target. Wen Kexing instantly switched tactics. In Zhou Zishu's hands, that flexible sword moved in clear and righteous strokes, but in Wen Kexing's hands, it was extremely wicked and unearthly, as vexing to counter as a malignant cyst that had pervaded the bone.

Quick as lightning, the two exchanged about ten moves in the darkness. However, it was Zhou Zishu who suddenly spoke up after a moment's listening with his brow furrowed. "Senior Ye?"

The other party humphed lightly. Zhou Zishu raised the luminescent pearl once more, and illuminated that uniquely foul expression of Ye Baiyi's. Wen Kexing only withdrew his sword then, and cheerily saluted him with a hand over his fist. "It was a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding. A pure misunderstanding."

He was clearly lying--Zhou Zishu could guess who the opponent was based on sound alone, much less Wen Kexing, who had personally been exchanging blows with him. Clearly, Wen Kexing was dishonestly borrowing the cover of darkness to dish out a beating as he had truthfully wished to do so; it was evident that he still had some persistent preconceived notions against this old senior with a mysterious background.

Ye Baiyi swept an eye across Zhou Zishu, and frowned. "How have you ended up in this half-dead state..."

Zhou Zishu was saving any morsel of energy whenever he could; slumping on his shoulder against the rock wall, he gave in before Ye Baiyi could criticise him, "This junior is too incapable, and is a rice bin."

Ye Baiyi glanced at him in surprise, nodded, and said, "Consider it that you have some self-awareness." He surveyed the surroundings, then beckoned to the three of them. "Come this way."

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing knew that this old man was very capable,¹³⁹ and were happy for him to take the lead. The two of them provided support by bringing up the rear, trapping Zhang Chengling in the middle. As they walked, Wen Kexing plastered himself to Zhou Zishu out of the blue, hooked an arm around his waist and silently took an arm of his to prop it across his shoulders.

Zhou Zishu glanced at him and frowned. "Have I been crippled?"

Wen Kexing sighed, "That old freak is here, what are you overtaxing yourself for? Let's keep walking."

It was odd; on their own, the two of them ran into danger multiple times, and they felt that this place had as many paths as a haunted cave. However, as they trailed after Ye Baiyi, the journey was oddly smooth-sailing. The four of them walked around in innumerable circles, and safely reached an area that looked like a large hall. Everything was still and peaceful when they had entered, but yet, a moment later, countless round balls about a foot in diameter came rolling out at them from all directions.

Reflexively, Wen Kexing booted Zhang Chengling behind him, then picked up Zhou Zishu in a bridal carry and glided three to four zhang out. These things had made him suffer immensely; manufactured in some unknown way, they exploded once they came into contact with something. For a very long while, Wen Kexing had

¹³⁹ Literally translates to "isn't a vegetarian"; monks, known for their compassion (and are therefore 'soft'), are usually vegetarian. To say someone "isn't a vegetarian" means they're the opposite: they're capable enough to not be a pushover.

been scampering around in the underground passages as they pursued him, feeling like he had become a large rat.

Yet, Ye Baiyi was utterly calm. Watching those spheres surge at them like the tide, he abruptly gave a loud, short shout, and delivered a palm strike through the air in front of him. He was using some unknown technique, but Zhang Chengling's eyes were sharp, and he noticed that the stone tiles by his feet had shattered in an instant. The first ball that rolled over was the first to suffer damage; it exploded, and immediately thereafter, created a chain reaction of continuous explosions. Ye Baiyi's hands were braced in the same spot, appearing to have erected an unseen wall that blocked them from the chaos, which was almost a force of nature in itself.

Wen Kexing's expression became more solemn as he regarded Ye Baiyi, who had his back turned to them, with a thoughtful gaze.

Thereafter, they heard Ye Baiyi command, "Show yourself!"

He reached out a hand and made a grabbing motion. A large tile of stone fell from the wall of the enormous hall. The figure of a person flashed into view.

Zhou Zishu and the rest looked in the direction of Ye Baiyi's gaze, and were temporarily stunned.

Chapter 49 - Long Que

¹⁴⁰ By his features, that person looked about thirty years of age. Surprisingly, he was a quadriplegic; his limbs had shrunk to the size of those of a child's, his exposed arms atrophied and wrinkled. His head was disproportionately huge and his neck was tilted to the side, as though it could not straighten one bit. He did not resemble a human at all, and looked greatly frightening. He sat on a wooden wheelchair, which slowly rolled out from that hole.

Ye Baiyi's forehead creased slowly as he stared at that person. All of a sudden, he said, "You are not Long Que."

Long Que and his Puppet Manor was a legend that had been circulating in the jianghu for a few decades; there was no way that the real Long Que could be this young. That person on the wheelchair emitted a screeching laugh, and said, "Of course, I am not."

His eyes were extremely wide. Wen Kexing furtively whispered to Zhou Zishu, "Look at his eyes, don't they look like they're about to fall out?"

Zhou Zishu felt that Wen Kexing had nothing better to do, as though Wen Kexing needed to jump at every opportunity to say something pointless no matter the situation, in order to feel like he had recouped whatever he had invested. He ignored him.

The person on the wheelchair screeched, "Who are you? You dare to barge into the Puppet Manor?"

Ye Baiyi gave this person a once-over, and was of the opinion that this person had a peculiar temperament and did not look to be a good person. Forcing himself to be patient with great difficulty, he spoke in an appropriate tone of voice, "I have matters to see Long Que about."

From Ye Baiyi's perspective, he was speaking pleasantly, but to the ears of others, he was still speaking in that same unpleasantly stiff and arrogant manner. The person in the wheelchair turned his head around. Giant eyes regarded him, and a while later, he finally humphed coldly, saying, "That old numbskull Long Que, he's been dead long enough that even what's left of his bones have decomposed. Why are you looking for him?"

The trench between Ye Baiyi's eyebrows was growing deeper and deeper. He stared at that person and asked, "Long Que is dead? How did he die?"

¹⁴⁰ T/N: Certain representations of characters with physical disability in this chapter might be uncomfortable to some readers.

That person on the wheelchair said smugly, "Of course, I was the one who killed him."

This was too unbelievable; trespassing the Puppet Manor made the three great experts of the present age extremely bedraggled, and they had nearly died within it. How could he, a person who couldn't even walk, enter without being harmed at all and kill the master of the Puppet Manor?

Evidently, Ye Baiyi did not know what 'tact' was; he looked this person up and down, and said, "Don't talk bullshit. If you can kill Long Que, a termite can shake an enormous tree. Unless you're Long Que's son--then he'd lie down, stay still and let you hack away at him."

Once he heard this, Wen Kexing knew that things were going to get worse, and immediately told Zhang Chengling, "Get out of here, quick, run!"

Indeed, even before his words died down, that strange person on the wheelchair roared in rage, "You're seeking your own death!"

He raised his hand and clapped it on the armrest. Human shapes, so many that they appeared as a tightly-packed mass, protruded from the four walls of the great hall. Thereafter, ten-odd bare-headed, polished puppets with ferocious expressions swarmed out from all directions. As he ran towards the exit, Zhang Chengling was unable to avoid them in time, and crashed straight into a puppet. That puppet was rather uncourteous, and rotated its elbow to split his skull open.

Zhou Zishu instantly flicked his finger, hitting Zhang Chengling directly in the knee so that he collapsed to his knees with a 'thud' and just barely dodged the attack. Zhang Chengling scrambled over to him, surveyed their surroundings, slack-jawed, and exclaimed, "Shifu, are we in Hell?"

Zhou Zishu sighed, knowing that he was fated to only ever brush shoulders with the word "pampered". Slapping Wen Kexing's arm away, he slotted Zhang Chengling between them and stood back to back with Wen Kexing, speaking in a low voice, "Of these artificial puppets, one is tough, and the other can't be killed. But there are also benefits to them."

Wen Kexing asked curiously, "There are still benefits?"

Zhou Zishu said, "One can't jump, and the other is stupid."

In the time he took to speak, two puppets had launched separate attacks from the two sides. Wen Kexing picked Zhang Chengling up. As though he had a telepathic connection with Zhou Zishu, they leapt in two separate directions at the same time. Instantly, those puppets lost their targets, crashed hard into each other, and toppled to the ground, entangled.

Wen Kexing swept his gaze over them. With a lecherous smile on his face, he covered Zhang Chengling's eyes and sighed, "Looking at this top and this bottom¹⁴¹ struggling, it's like watching a pornographic picture start to move."

Once Zhou Zishu landed, a puppet brought a huge stick down at his head. He flipped away to avoid it, feeling a burning pain from his chest to his throat, as though even the slightest cough could bring a mouthful of blood up, and gritted his teeth tight to hold his coughing back.

That puppet missed his strike, and continued pursuing him in dissatisfaction. It swept the stick at his chest, and Zhou Zishu bent backwards at the waist to avoid the blow. Spying the movement, Wen Kexing could not help but murmur, "That waist is sure flexible."

Before that puppet could deliver its third strike, he lifted a hand and tossed Zhang Chengling over through the air. As he watched Zhang Chengling flail his arms and legs in panic, looking for all like a large toad experiencing muscle spasms, he spoke up and reminded him, "Have you eaten the sword techniques I taught you together with your meals?"

Zhang Chengling went "ah", and haphazardly threw himself on the puppet that was closing in on Zhou Zishu. Landing from above, he managed to cause that puppet to lose its balance, and boy and puppet toppled together. He jumped to his feet hastily, rubbing at where his ass hurt from falling on it, and asked, flustered from panic, "Senior, which...which move should I use?"

Zhou Zishu, who was taking the chance to catch his breath, grabbed his collar and threw him at Wen Kexing again, saying, "Stop adding trouble to the mix."

The situation was still decent, for the three of them who had merely been dragged into this trouble. It was slightly worse for Ye Baiyi, who had directly offended the master of this place with his rude words: a dense swarm of human puppets surrounded him, clustering around him so tightly that water could hardly seep through the gaps between them. At the same time, this old man was even more stubborn in old age and was determined to go toe-to-toe with those puppets; it was a racket over there, as lively as a New Year's celebration.¹⁴²

Zhou Zishu raised a fist to press it against his own chest, forcing back a mouthful of saccharine blood. To Wen Kexing, who was edging close to him, he said, "This

¹⁴¹ 上下其手 means being in cahoots with someone and manipulating a situation for selfish benefits, but 上下 literally means "upper" and "lower".

¹⁴² Priest describes this as "pi-li-pa-la", which is onomatopoeia for the crackling of firecrackers but also the commotion from a scuffle.

can't do, I'm afraid we won't be able to hold out for long. Who knows how many puppets there are in this godforsaken place?"

Wen Kexing replied, "This place is called the Puppet Manor. He looks to be the only living being to me, while the rest are these objects."

Zhou Zishu narrowed his eyes. "Makes sense. Looks like he's also the only one that can be killed."

The two of them exchanged a look. As neither of them were good apples, they were well-coordinated even without prior discussion. Once again, Wen Kexing flung Zhang Chengling out like the Gaoshan Slave's meteor hammer. Watching him pin another one to the ground as he howled, Zhou Zishu shot out in a glide, picked up that little tyke, and set him aside before the toppled puppet could beat him to death with its elbow. Then the tip of his foot touched the ground lightly, and he sprung at the strange man on the wheelchair, his body as quick and light as a sparrow's.

The person said coldly, "Another one who has come seeking his death." He leant back, and ten or so iron chains abruptly shot out from beneath that wooden wheelchair. A long spear was attached to the end of each chain, which hurtled at Zhou Zishu from various directions.

Zhou Zishu sank a breath to his diaphragm, dropping through the air with 'The Fall of A Thousand-Catty Weight'.¹⁴³ With a quick slide of his feet, he was behind a human puppet in a flash. The spear which tracked him crashed into that puppet, its blade bending in the opposite direction as its metal chain wrapped the human puppet up like a dumpling.

Zhou Zishu flicked his long sleeve outwards as he spoke, "Did you think that I won't use a hidden weapon?"

That strange person startled. Smacking the armrest of the wheelchair hard, a metal umbrella suddenly popped open in front of him. Still, after a long moment's wait, nothing happened--This lowlife tactic of frightening someone was one that Zhou Zishu had learnt from Gu Xiang. Under these circumstances, he couldn't care about his expert status, nor whether it was gentlemanly to do so or not, and used it on him.

Discovering that he had fallen for the trick, that strange person was humiliated and furious, and lowered the umbrella. But where was there still any sign of Zhou Zishu before him? Putting Ye Baiyi aside, he searched the surroundings, and suddenly heard someone laugh from the rafters, "I say, do you really take everything handed to you at face-value, dummy?"

¹⁴³ In case you've forgotten about its previous appearance in Chapter 12, it's a martial art move of the Cherry Blossom Pole (梅花樁) kungfu style.

That odd man raised his head to look. Wen Kexing was descending through the air, and in his hand, he had a large stick that some puppet had dropped, which he slammed down on his head. Yet, a round explosive ball suddenly emerged out of nowhere above the wheelchair; meeting this nemesis of his, Wen Kexing swung the stick forcefully with a low curse, and sent that ball flying. He did not pay attention to where he had sent that thing off to, but in any case, he heard Ye Baiyi rage afterwards, “The Wen rascal, are you planning to die?”

Wen Kexing executed a mid-air flip and landed. Looking behind him, he saw Ye Baiyi’s dust-caked, dishevelled appearance, and was instantly overjoyed. Turning his head, he hollered at that person in the wheelchair, “Quick, give me another ball.”

The person in the wheelchair was enraged, but before he could react, he heard a clear whistle by his ear. Turning his head to the side, he caught the pure and bright flash of a sword blade swooping at his throat with a killing aura. Conscious of the danger it posed, he did not dare to take any chances, and opened the umbrella in front of him once more, intending to flee from this great hall.

The next instant, this person in the wheelchair moved no more. Those eyes of his, which were already twice as big as an ordinary person’s, grew even wider as they looked down in disbelief. He had not anticipated that it was a flexible sword in his opponent’s hand--a flexible sword that could be controlled as one pleased.

This was the last thought in his mind--the Baiyi in Zhou Zishu’s hand speared his throat through.

Though he had achieved his target with a single strike, Zhou Zishu did not loiter. Hearing the noises of a puppet in pursuit at his back, he flew into the air without looking back, leaping over that wheelchair. Confronted with an obstacle, the puppet instantly raised its stick and whacked it. There was a “crack”, and it smashed that supremely miraculous wooden wheelchair into pieces. Parts and mechanisms littered the floor, then, like they had been frozen with a spell, all the puppets in the hall halted.

Upon landing, Zhou Zishu stumbled. Wen Kexing, who had long been waiting off to the side, immediately reached out to catch him. He turned his head to peck him on the cheek, and praised, “Splendid sword technique!”

Zhou Zishu wiped at his face like he was wiping at the saliva left behind after a dog had licked his cheek, pushed Wen Kexing away, and said expressionlessly, “Splendidly sleazy of you.”¹⁴⁴

Expression dark, Ye Baiyi collected Zhang Chengling, who had fallen to the ground after a toppled puppet tripped him, and strode over to them. Without a word,

¹⁴⁴ 好剑 (good sword technique) and 好贱 (how sleazy of you) sound the exact same in Chinese (hao3 jian4).

he struck at Wen Kexing with his palm, which the latter dodged with a cheeky grin on his face. As Wen Kexing evaded the blows, he said, "Aiyo, old senior, why are you still splitting hairs with a junior over these trivial things?"

Zhou Zishu sighed. He coughed softly twice, weakly sat on a toppled puppet, and said, "Take a break, both of you. I say, Old Senior Ye who's not a rice bin, you should hurry up and take a look at these mechanisms with your omnipotent knowledge, and come up with a way to get us out of here."

Ye Baiyi cast a glance at that wooden wheelchair in fragments and said, "You've smashed the mechanisms to a pulp. Come up with a way, my foot." Turning, he strode towards the hole in the wall which the strange person in the wheelchair had emerged from. Zhang Chengling ran over to them, and asked in a small voice, "Shifu, are you fine?"

This child had just been swung around multiple times like a piece of rock by these two. Yet, he did not hold a grudge against them, his mind still entirely filled with worry over his shifu's injury. Peered at by those pure eyes full of concern, Zhou Zishu instantly felt a little like a scumbag, and so he spoke in a rare gentle voice, "Not a problem."

With his back to him, Zhang Chengling bent his knees. "Shifu, I'll carry you on my back."

Finding it humorous, Zhou Zishu patted him on the shoulder and got to his feet without help, saying, "That's enough, I'm not counting on you to do so."

He had just walked two steps when Wen Kexing came over without giving him time to protest, caught him around the waist and reeled him in. Inwardly griping that this fellow had not gotten his fill of taking advantage of him, Zhou Zishu went to hit him with his elbow, but Wen Kexing hastily said, "Save your energy, if that old glutton fails to successfully tinker with these mechanisms in a while, we still have to count on you to fight."

Zhou Zishu thought about it and found it reasonable, and he borrowed Wen Kexing's strength to lean against him. Once he let himself relax, he found that his whole body felt like it was about to fall apart, and he nearly failed to catch his next breath.

At this moment, they heard Ye Baiyi say, "All of you, come over here."

The three people followed him into that hole in the wall. Within it, there was something else that had been entirely hidden: On the whole face of a wall, the lines on it numerous and complicated, was a map of the entirety of the Puppet Manor.

Wen Kexing raised his head and looked at it once over, flabbergasted. A while later, he finally spoke, "This...even if you show me this, I can't make head or tail of it."

Zhou Zishu laughed under his breath. "That's great, me neither."

Ye Baiyi glanced at them. Finally, for once, he had no words for them. Pointing at Zhang Chengling, he instructed, "You, come with me." Hurriedly, Zhang Chengling followed him, only to see Ye Baiyi fiddle with the wall here and there. He didn't know what he had tinkered with, but that wall opened up in an instant, revealing the various mechanisms inside that would make people gasp in wonderment.

Zhou Zishu tilted his head back and gazed at it, sighing, "This person who constructed the Puppet Manor is truly an eccentric with outstanding skill." With Zhang Chengling as Ye Baiyi's assistant, the old man and the young boy worked and puzzled over it. Finally, after a long period of time, they heard a massive rumbling as the roof opened up and brought a wall along with it, revealing a set of stairs.

The four people climbed it with caution. It was unknown how far they had ventured upwards, but astonishingly, they reemerged back on ground level. There was wind, there was sunlight, and there were plants--it was a small, decent courtyard.

Ye Baiyi said, "This is the actual Puppet Manor."

His gaze surveyed the surroundings, and he suddenly strode towards a small cabin, which door had been gated with large iron grills. That cabin was located underneath a large tree; gloomy, with its windows and door tightly sealed, it looked like a prison.

Ye Baiyi channelled energy into his palm, and tore the gate down in one go. Then, he pushed the door open and walked in with a brazenness born of his peerless skills. The three of them followed close behind, but stopped at the same time as Ye Baiyi did--in this small cell, there was a bed, on which a person was bound in thick iron chains.

He was an old man, his hair and whiskers entirely white. Both his eyes were lightless; they had gone blind, because he had lived in darkness for too long. Like he had heard noises, he turned his head towards them. His skeletal body shivered involuntarily.

A long while later, Ye Baiyi finally asked, "You...are Long Que?"

Chapter 50 - The Key

The old man turned his ear towards them. He gave a neurotic twitch, and the chains on him jangled together with the movement. Furtively, Zhang Chengling tugged at Zhou Zishu, and asked in a small voice, “Shifu...those chains, are they stuck through his pipa bones?¹⁴⁵”

Zhou Zishu shushed him, glanced over with a frown--and discovered that the chains on this old man weren't wrapped around him, but were pierced through him. Though the pipa bones, through the kneecaps, the wounds there had festered, leaving only bone. In Zhou Zishu's view, to be able to still survive like this was already a difficult feat.

The stench within the house was overpowering, with faeces and piss everywhere. The original colours long faded past recognition, the old man's clothes could not even cover his body, totally depriving him of the decorum a human being should have had. He opened his mouth, and like he had not spoken in a very long time, his pronunciation was slow and slurred as he asked them hoarsely, “Who...are you? Where is...Long Xiao?”

Ye Baiyi asked, “Is Long Xiao a quadriplegic in a wheelchair? He's dead--how was he related to you?”

Hearing this, the old man was stunned for a long while. Suddenly, he opened his mouth wide. The expression on his face seemed to be one of hearty laughter, but not a single bit of sound came out. Then, a few murky teardrops slowly seeped out of the corner of his eye, fell instantly, and vanished. Ye Baiyi ignored him, merely squatted down to examine the iron chains on him, and let him laugh and cry intermittently like a lunatic.

A good while later, Ye Baiyi finally extended his hand to Zhou Zishu. “Lend me your sword.”

Zhou Zishu knew that he was intending to use Baiyi to break the chains, so he loosened it from himself and handed it over. Taking the sword, Ye Baiyi hacked at a length of chain. There was a sharp “clang”, but that chain did not budge in the slightest, and had not even a dent. Instead, the Baiyi sword in his hand trembled continuously.

Looking at it, Zhou Zishu felt his teeth ache.

That old man suddenly spoke up. “You don't have to...waste your energy, it's useless.”

¹⁴⁵ The scapulas

Ye Baiyi asked, "What abominable sin did you commit that made that quadriplegic hate you so?"

The old man was silent for a moment, then said, "I committed... the only thing I've done to let him down was to raise such a...son like him."

The few of them exchanged looks. Now, they understood why Long Xiao's shame had turned to fury then when Ye Baiyi had said "unless you're Long Que's son"--this old glutton was practically a divinity, with the way he had accidentally been right about such an implausible relation.

A long while later, Wen Kexing suddenly asked, "You said that his name was Long...it isn't the 'filial' (xiao) from 'filial piety', is it?"

Feeling that Wen Kexing was truly prodding at sore spots, Zhou Zishu jabbed him with his elbow. Not daring to duck away, Wen Kexing bore the brunt of it, and gazed piteously at Zhou Zishu as he rubbed his rib bone.

The old man laughed hoarsely, "I must have committed the greatest sins in my previous life, as severe as murder and arson, and is suffering karmic retribution in this one!"

The old man leant against the bedpost. Extending a hand that resembled the skin of a tangerine, he rubbed that bedpost again and again. Having spoken for a while, his tongue seemed to have limbered up. "This was mine and Yu Zhui's bedroom back then, and that little beast was born here. Come to think of it, us husband and wife will both die in his hands. Heh, isn't this fate?"

Zhou Zishu asked in a gentle voice, "Yu Zhui is your esteemed wife?"

That old man's face was too ghastly to lay eyes on; it was impossible to tell whether it was beautiful or ugly, joyful or melancholic. But when the two words "Yu Zhui" were mentioned, that face overgrown with trenches appeared to relax much. A teardrop was still trapped in the deep wrinkle by his mouth. It glimmered, but did not fall regardless. He sighed. "I lost her because she gave birth to the kid. After Yuzhui was gone, I built the Puppet Manor, and dismissed the servants..."

Zhang Chengling looked at Wen Kexing in shocked amazement. He was finding this Senior Wen even more incredible, because he had been right about even this. The old man continued, "I promised Yu Zhui to raise that little beast properly, but he was born unable to stand. So I imparted to him every drop of knowledge I had, my life's worth of it, thinking that even if he could not master anything else, he could still have had the ability to support himself, ai!"

Ye Baiyi asked, "If it was so, why did he want to imprison you?"

The old man's whole frame started to tremble. After a long while of silence, he finally murmured, "It was for the Yin Yang Manual."

Other than Zhang Chengling, the gazes of the other three people grew serious as they stared unblinkingly at this half-dead old man. Zhou Zishu asked in a soft voice, "Is it...Madam Rong's Yin Yang Manual?"

The old man nodded, and said slowly, "New flesh regrows on dead bones, as Yin and Yang are reversed--"

There was no intractable disease in the world that the legendary sacred artefact of the Healers' Valley could not treat. Even the Green Vixen wished that it could heal her face; who would thirst for it more than a highly ambitious man who had been born paralysed?

Zhou Zishu thought quickly, and asked, "Wasn't the Yin Yang Manual sealed within the Lapis Armour together with the Fengshan Sword Manual and the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra from the very start? Did he think that the Lapis Armour was with you?"

"Lapis Armour?" That old man scoffed. Shaking his head, he said, "You all, are wrong. I was the one who crafted the Lapis Armour all those years ago, but it's only a lock. If you want to obtain the things sealed within it, the five pieces of Lapis Armour are useless. Even six pieces, seven pieces, eight pieces are useless. It still lacks a 'key'."

Ye Baiyi raised an eyebrow. "The key is with you?"

The old man said woodenly, "I don't have it."

Ye Baiyi chased him for answers. "If it's not in your hands, whose hands can it be in?"

The old man laughed almost self-deprecatingly. "Yes, you don't believe it. He didn't either."

Zhou Zishu regarded him closely for a long while, then suddenly asked, "Senior Long, you do know whose hands the key is in, don't you?"

The old man turned his head to face Zhou Zishu as if he could see him. Nodding, he said, "You're correct, I do--I made a vow back then. No one could reveal where it was, and no one could be told of the key's whereabouts. Long Xiao...Long Xiao's insane."

Ye Baiyi narrowed his eyes, and pressed on, insistent. "So, you're someone who knows about what happened between Rong Xuan and the others thirty years ago?"

The old man nodded his head in silence, but before Ye Baiyi could ask, he said, “I can’t speak of it. Rong Xuan and his wife are benefactors who saved my life. I promised Madam Rong this. I can’t speak of it.”

Ye Baiyi replied coldly, “This is not up to you.”

The old man laughed, and moved his leg over with strenuous effort. Feeling around for the metal chain that had been pierced through his kneecap, he lifted it for Ye Baiyi to see, and continued to make light of it, “What else can you do to me? Long Xiao, that little beast...has already kept me captive for three years. What else can you do to me?”

Looking at this old man, for whom even exhaling was a chore, lean against the bedpost with a faint, barely-there hint of a smile and a languorous demeanour, Zhou Zishu was suddenly reminded of those words that General Fan Kuai¹⁴⁶ of a past era had uttered, “I am afraid of not even death; why would I refuse a mere cup of wine?”, and he could not help himself from speculating what kind of person this Long Que was.

He was shockingly talented, yet, for one person, he would seclude himself from the bustle of humanity, and single-handedly construct the highly mysterious and perilous Puppet Manor; for a promise, to keep a secret, he lived through three years of Hell on Earth, and not even his own biological son could loosen his tongue...Zhou Zishu suddenly felt that because there was this old man--who was clinging onto his last breath of life--before his eyes, no one else in the whole jianghu was fit to be called a “noble hero”.

The arm that Wen Kexing was hugging him with tightened abruptly, as though he wanted to press Zhou Zishu’s whole body into his own. Zhou Zishu frowned slightly. Turning to look at him, he found Wen Kexing staring numbly at Long Que. There was no trace of laughter on his face, and for one moment, Zhou Zishu even thought that a glint of moisture might have flashed past in those incredibly dark eyes of his. But it was there for only a brief instant, and then it was gone.

He heard him tell Ye Baiyi. “Hey, old freak, since he’s not willing to speak, stop asking for people to dislike you.”

Ye Baiyi ignored him. Grabbing Long Que’s arm, he said coldly, “I don’t want to know about the Lapis Armour or the key or whatever it is. I only want to ask, how did Rong Xuan and his wife die all those years ago?”

¹⁴⁶ Fan Kuai: A Western Han military general most well-known for his involvement in the Feast of Hong Men, where he saved the life of future Han dynasty Emperor Liu Bang.

He was gripping him so tightly that the veins on the back of his hands were bulging. An expression of pain showed on Long Que's face at the overly-tight grip, but still he insisted, "I'm not..."

Wen Kexing frowned, set Zhou Zishu down, and passed him off to Zhang Chengling. For some unclear reason, he snapped at Ye Baiyi in anger, "Old freak, haven't you had enough?"

Then, without prior warning, he suddenly made trouble by launching an attack at Ye Baiyi's back.

As Zhang Chengling supported Zhou Zishu's weight, he stared dumbly at Wen Kexing and Ye Baiyi brawling in a dizzying whirl of motion, slack-jawed. He did not understand at all why these comrades of earlier had suddenly fallen out with each other.

The commotion when these two brawled was not minor; this prison which held Long Que captive started shaking like there was an earthquake, as they went at each other with the force of demolishing a house. Each move of Wen Kexing's was wicked and brutal, as he was no longer holding back out of consideration for their relations. Incensed, Ye Baiyi rebuked, "Rascal, are you crazy?"

Wen Kexing humphed coldly. "You're an eyesore, and I want to beat you up. Can't I do so?"

Whenever Zhang Chengling encountered something that he did not understand, he asked for clarification, and thus, he asked Zhou Zishu, "Shifu..."

Zhou Zishu ignored him. His brow was tightly furrowed as the events seemed to suddenly take on an approximate shape in his mind. Suddenly enlightened, he pushed Zhang Chengling away, walked to Long Que's side, and sat down.

Long Que tilted his head to listen for a moment, then asked, "You've been injured?"

Zhou Zishu said, "Your son did this."

Long Que started to laugh. In a low and hoarse voice, he said, "That's fine...look at me, you're still decent."

Zhou Zishu did not speak, but started to closely examine the chains on his body. When it came to traps and mechanisms, he was completely at a loss; when it came to instruments of torture, however, none were more familiar with them than the ex-leader of Tian Chuang. Still, even after Zhou Zishu had looked over it repeatedly, he could not tell what that metal chain was made of. So he gave up, and told Long Que, "I'm at the limit of my abilities. Now that your son is dead, what's going to happen to you?"

Long Que thought about it, and said calmly, “It’s time for me to die too--I should have died a long time ago, but he didn’t let me. Now, no one can control what I do. In my whole life, the thing I regret the most is not educating Yu Zhui’s son well. I know that he’s my son too, but I always felt that he took Yu Zhui’s life. If only...all these years, if I had only been a slightly better dad, I wouldn’t have harmed him so.”

Zhou Zishu felt there was reason in these words, and did not know how to comfort him either. In the end, he admitted honestly, “That is true.”

By this point, Ye Baiyi and Wen Kexing had literally raised the roof. The two of them leapt outside and continued their fight, but this dark prison was greatly brightened all of a sudden. As though he could feel the sun, Long Que reached a trembling hand out to it, and sighed in deep satisfaction.

Zhou Zishu was about to speak when Ye Baiyi, unable to tolerate it any further, raged outside the house, “What are you sticking your nose in this for, rascal? Long, I have to know what happened to Rong Xuan all those years ago no matter what. He was my disciple!”

With this roar, even Long Que was given pause. Wen Kexing’s leg froze in a horizontal sweep mid-air. Holding this comical posture, he regarded Ye Baiyi with an odd gaze, ruminating that since Rong Xuan and Long Que were of the same generation, and Ye Baiyi was Rong Xuan’s shifu...could this Ye person really be a long-lived tortoise bastard?¹⁴⁷

Ye Baiyi glared at him frostily, and turned to return to the house. Standing in front of Long Que, he looked down upon him from a height, and said stiffly, “Back then, Rong Xuan stole the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra from me, left the mountain, and never returned. Today, because of what he has left behind, the pugilist world of the Central Plains has invoked the Realm’s Command. Do I not deserve to know what happened all those years ago?”

Long Que asked, “You are Ye...Ye...”

“I am Ye Baiyi.”

Long Que took a deep breath and shook his head, sighing. “I didn’t think that Senior would still be alive...”

An elderly person whose hair and whiskers were entirely white was addressing a person with a young man’s face “Senior”--this scene before his eyes was extremely uncanny.

¹⁴⁷ 千年王八万年龟: The Chinese soft-shelled turtle (王八) is also the term for “bastard”, and tortoises are known for their longevity.

Zhou Zishu thought for a bit, then interjected, “I stumbled across a Puppet Manor trap with two human puppets, male and female. There are many human puppets in this manor, but all of them are bare-headed, polished, and made from the same mould. None of them are like that couple, who were made with great detail and resembled actual human beings. Senior Long, that pair of human puppets of yours, were they you and your esteemed wife, or Rong Xuan and his wife?”

Long Que closed his eyes. A long while later, he finally replied, “Rong Xuan and his wife.”

Zhou Zishu said in a soft voice, “In the end, they dashed each other’s skulls to smithereens.”

Long Que’s hand trembled almost unnoticeably. Ye Baiyi asked, “Rong Xuan underwent a qi deviation?”

Long Que nodded silently, and said, “Indeed. Before Madam Rong died, he had already descended into insanity from qi deviation. Madam Rong died at his hands.”

Chapter 51 - The Past

“Back then, Rong Xuan and I, and a few others, were still in our youth and thought ourselves to be rather capable. As birds of a seedy feather, we often drank together and exchanged techniques. Rong Xuan was the most skilled among us, with the most instinctive sense of comprehension. One day, after drinking, Rong Xuan suddenly started to philosophise: if men who lived on this earth did not accomplish anything great and simply lived a quiet and obscure life, wasn't it a regrettable loss?”

Long Que was still speaking at an extremely slow pace. On top of that, for every bit he spoke, he had to pause for a while; he might have been too weak, or those events might have been too distant in the past and required detailed recollection. Ye Baiyi's face revealed nothing, but Wen Kexing quietened down and, for once, was listening with rapt attention.

“Rong Xuan said that the world of martial techniques was vast and profound, and that each of the supreme techniques of the various great sects in the jianghu had their strengths and shortcomings. Every few decades or centuries, a genius would appear in the pugilist world, and they would become a grandmaster of their time and start their own clan. Huashan, Kunshan, Cangshan, and the rest had all been the same. Yet, their successors were often weak, and did no more than woodenly imitate the teachings of their forebears. As each successive generation grows less capable than the one before, there will be a decline of the sect, and there will be a death of the sect. Yet, each great sect treasures their useless broomstick simply because it's their own--they squirrel their bit of gongfu at the bottom of the chest, away from the eyes of others. After ages of doing so, innumerable divine skills and supreme techniques have been lost to time. Rong Xuan felt that it was foolish to have these 'sects'...”

At this, Ye Baiyi could not hold back his frosty “hmp”. “These words were originally mine--that rascal did no more than repeat them word-for-word. Without looking at them, you can tell that all those who introduce themselves to be from sects and think themselves rather capable are definitely useless. They learn only what others teach them, and can master only what they've learnt. How are they any different from the monkeys trained by street performers? As for a supreme martial technique, isn't it still devised by a human being? To have your skull cracked in the struggle for a secret manual that someone else wrote; not only are you plagiarising someone else's words entirely, you're also worshipping it as wisdom. Do you think that someone else has two brains, or do you feel that you didn't grow one?”

Zhou Zishu could not hold back a small laugh. Immediately, Ye Baiyi glared at him and said, “What are you laughing at? You were led astray by Qin Huaizhang, that useless thing.”

Hearing this, Long Que was silent for a long while, then said, “Senior is an extraordinary person beyond mortal thinking, indeed.”

Then, he continued, "He conceived a plan. Discussing in secret, the few of us agreed to steal the martial techniques of our respective clans and put them together to create a store of them. We'd integrate these techniques, and invent a supreme one that combined the fortes of the clans. I crafted the mechanism for the martial store, which was the whole, complete Lapis Armour in those legends. After it was opened, a key was still required. The Lapis Armour was separately entrusted to each of us for safekeeping, while Madam Rong was responsible for the key..."

Ye Baiyi interrupted him again. "Combine the fortes of the clans? In this world, strengths and weaknesses are interdependent. Nothing can be solely advantageous without its disadvantages--what he said is bullshit. Can the Vajra Palmstrike and E'Mei Barb be fused together? Can a burly and thickset man squeeze into a petite girl's skirts? This is a logic that even children understand--if you can genuinely understand the true philosophy of martial arts, you can even glean insights from the falling leaves and flowers, or the rise and fall of waves. If you can't, even if you steal all the classic manuals under the sky, you're no more than one who copies from books."

Long Que did not speak, but only sighed a long sigh.

Among the few of them, the others might have no idea of this, but Zhou Zishu was very clear: whether it was stealing another clan's secret manuals, or leaking the martial techniques of one's own clan to outsiders, these were major taboos of the jianghu. Hearing this, he understood why Hero Zhao Jing had been expelled from his clan all those years ago, and could not help but ask, "Those few people that you mentioned, were they the succeeding generation of elites of the five major clans back then? For example, those of Zhao Jing, Gao Chong, and Shen Zhen's generation?"

--No wonder Hero Zhao kept his mouth shut tight about the Lapis Armour, and talked about it in ambiguous terms even in the end.

Long Que nodded, and said with a dismal laugh, "Indeed. What's laughable is that back then, we still thought ourselves trailblazers who were smashing all the boundaries between clans--and what Rong Xuan produced, was half of the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra."

Unconsciously, the gazes of the others focused on Ye Baiyi. Zhou Zishu asked, "Senior, what is the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra?"

Ye Baiyi frowned, and for once, did not use it to lecture at length. "The Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra is an ancient artefact of legend. The true Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra has actually been lost. A...friend of mine obtained the remnants of it by chance, and spent twenty years supplementing the missing parts to produce a full copy on his own. It was divided into upper and lower scrolls; Rong Xuan stole the lower scroll, while the upper scroll remained on Changming Mountain back then, and he...we destroyed it."

At once, Zhou Zishu obtained two pieces of information from his words. Firstly, there was a person of the same generation and who was close friends with Ye Baiyi on Changming Mountain. Secondly, this person had dared to restore this ancient artefact with supplementary material, and was thus definitely also an expert. He recalled Ye Baiyi's words "When did I say I was the ancient monk?¹⁴⁸", and cocked his brow, thinking, Could that person be the true ancient monk of Changming Mountain?

Then, was the reason why Ye Baiyi had left the mountain alone in the name of the ancient monk because the actual ancient monk was unable to carry out these actions, or was it...because he was no longer of this world?

These thoughts stayed for less than a second before they flashed past. Long Que continued, "We all read that half of the ancient text. Its contents were really too profound, and no one could grasp it completely. In that period of time, every one of us forsook food and sleep to scour ravenously for information in the vast sea of classical manuals. We hoped to find any minute trace that would help explain that cultivation mantra--its attraction was too great. Rong Xuan said that if we had a complete grasp on the knowledge in that book, we would have a complete grasp on the universe,¹⁴⁹ and achieve true oneness with it."

That was a state of existence that had been passed down by legend since the ancient times. Everyone was pursuing that level of lofty existence at the top of the world, and no one could resist that sort of temptation.

However, these things never had their so-called "shortcuts". Just as how the rarest and most precious ingredients always grew in the most perilous places, the more powerful an object could make someone, the more mercilessly it tested their psyche. The more profound the martial technique, the easier it was to qi deviate.

Even Ye Baiyi fell silent this time round.

"Among us, Rong Xuan had gone the furthest, and was the one whose obsession was most deeply-rooted. He was almost fanatically besotted with that cultivation mantra, but none of us noticed, because at the time, we were all fanatically besotted--until one day, he declared that he had finally understood that the fundamental theory of the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra was to 'Reforge after destruction; without termination, the new cannot exist'."

¹⁴⁸ The NU translation uses "Monk Gu" for 古僧, but I'm translating it as ancient monk which I think is slightly more appropriate.

¹⁴⁹ As the footnote in Chapter 6 of the NU TL explains: "The Eight Wastelands and Six Constituents (八荒六合), 八荒 refers to extremely remote areas beyond China; 六合 means the six directions (north, south, east, west, up, down), basically everything in the universe."

Ye Baiyi was thunderstruck. He murmured, “What...”

Long Que’s hand was trembling a little--his whole body was trembling. “In the Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra, it’s said that ‘At the most extreme point of one’s journey, one can glean the secrets of the universe.’ What was this ‘extreme point of one’s journey’? It could be ridding yourself of martial ability, it could be severing your own meridians, or it could even be ending your own life...”

The oddest expression surfaced on Ye Baiyi’s face as he asked, “All of you thought so?”

Long Que had just nodded when Ye Baiyi suddenly laughed out loud. Even when he laughed heartily, his face was still stiff, and the corners of the eyes were unable to crinkle no matter what. Instead, they twitched unnaturally, generating a vague sense of tragedy. “Ridding yourself of martial ability, severing your own meridians, ending your own life...haha, to think that you could come up with that.”

Woodenly, Long Que related, “At the time, we had all gone mad. Everyone had become more irritable and impatient, most of all Rong Xuan. He said that to accomplish something top-notch, we had to have top-notch bravery, and dare to walk the path that others dare not even imagine...at the time, Yu Zhui was already heavily pregnant. Although I had been affected by that wicked manual, I had not been affected to the extent that I would abandon my wife and child, so I was the first one to back out. This was a risky endeavour, so they let me oversee the ritual as support.”

He took a deep breath. “They chose a time, and sat in a circle. If they did not succeed, they would have sacrificed themselves for a higher cause. But unexpectedly, when it actually came down to it, apart from Rong Xuan, the others withdrew unanimously at the last moment.”

Ye Baiyi said frostily, “Others practice martial arts for no more than identity and status, or their ambition for accomplishments, and not for martial arts itself. It’s not worth so much risk. Only Rong Xuan, that rascal, is a real fool for martial arts. What is so unexpected about that?”

Long Que nodded, and said, “He severed his meridians and stopped his own heart. He still had a smile on his face, but had already stopped breathing. We held our breaths and waited for a very long time, then, we finally understood that he was wrong...we woke from a great, fantastical dream, and all of us, either standing or sitting, were dumbfounded. Though Madam Rong did not know any martial arts, she was from the Healers’ Valley and had saved innumerable lives. Naturally, she was unwilling to accept that her husband had died just like that. She calmed down, took out eighteen silver needles, and inserted them into Rong Xuan’s chest. For three whole shichen, she persisted, preserving a bit of warmth in his chest and, surprisingly,

some shallow breathing. We all thought that he had lived, but he could not awaken. Clearly, he was comatose.”

“Tears rinsed Madam Rong’s face for three days. In the end, she decided to return to the Healers’ Valley to steal the Yin Yang Manual. She did not know martial arts, and it was a risky venture, so I accompanied her on the journey. Come to think of it, I personally brought that thing into this mortal world with my own hands.”

Wen Kexing suddenly looked at Zhou Zishu, lips tightening, and interrupted Long Que for the first time to ask, “That...Yin Yang Manual, can it really save the life of someone whose meridians have been severed?”

Upon hearing this, Zhou Zishu was stunned for a moment. He raised his head, and his gaze coincided with Wen Kexing’s. Suddenly, he felt a warmth in his chest--unbelievably, there was someone who constantly kept an injury that even the Great Shaman of Nanjiang had shaken his head at and deemed hopeless in their thoughts. Why bother doing so? Dazed, he reflected that everyone in this world was as though strangers who met by chance; they were no more than guests from another place who were briefly in the same situation. Could it be that...this person was actually sincere?

Once again, he turned his gaze away out of reflex, but felt Wen Kexing’s gaze on him. It felt like it had weight and warmth to it.

Long Que chuckled coldly. “A medical book, truly a sacred artefact. The kind of place the Healers’ Valley is, acclaimed for saving people from ailments and diseases--could it hide the manual away from sight? This Yin Yang Manual is a technique of transfer. To restore a person’s pulse, one has to exchange the patient’s heart with a beating heart that has been freshly ripped out from another person’s body...what kind of sacred artefact is this?”

Zhou Zishu asked, “Did Madam Rong really...”

Long Que was silent for a long while, then he sighed. “It is human nature to favour close ties and treat strangers with detachment. She was no saint; she was no more than a woman who betrayed her sect for her husband. Us outsiders cannot comment on whether her actions were right or wrong.”

“Rong Xuan lived,” Ye Baiyi said.

“Yes,” Long Que said. “He didn’t only live. I do not know if it was coincidence, or if that mantra is truly so devilishly strange, but after he woke up, the true qi within his body experienced explosive growth. After experiencing death once, he had really grasped that half of the manual. He didn’t even give Madam Rong the chance to cry on his shoulder in relief at regaining the person she had lost, and headed to cultivate in seclusion straightaway in order to restore the upper half of that book.”

Ye Baiyi evaluated, "Little beast."

Long Que continued, "Whatever happened afterwards, I do not know in detail either. My wife was about to give birth, and I focused on staying by her side. It was extremely risky for her in labour. The doctor managed to pull mother and son from the gates of Hell back to the land of the living, but after that, her body was completely depleted of vitality. I stayed by her side for half a year wholly; in the end, even the doctor was powerless to do anything else, and finally..."

As he spoke, tears slid down from the corners of his eyes. He gave a slow shake of his head, and said, "I had lost all hope. A friend of mine accompanied me on my return to look for them, as I intended to bid my farewells and part ways with them...when I returned to the martial store, we happened to come across Madam Rong grievously injured and near death. Rong Xuan's sword was sticking out of her chest, and Rong Xuan's hands were entirely covered with blood. We did not know if he had been struck dumb or if he had returned from the demonic insanity to his senses, as he had only stood to the side and gazed at her in a daze. Out of a moment's impulse, that friend of mine hefted his sword and swung it at him. I wanted to stop him, but it was too late. Thankfully, Rong Xuan's desire had been shaken--he had no interest in fighting, and he fled. By that point, the Lapis Armour had already vanished without a trace. Near death, Madam Rong handed the key to the martial store to that friend of mine. We took a vow on death to never reveal a single word about this in our lifetimes, so that no one could open that martial store."

When his voice died down, the few of them were silent for a long moment. After a good while, Zhou Zishu finally asked, "Then Rong Xuan went mad and turned savage, hid in the Ghost Valley from the people hunting him down, and was besieged and killed afterwards?"

Long Que sighed, and said, "By that time, I had already returned to the Puppet Manor, and no longer paid attention to mortal affairs. Approximately, that should be how things went."

"A death well-deserved." Ye Baiyi closed his eyes, gripping the hilt of the Baiyi sword tightly with both hands. The veins on the back of his hands bulged, and that hilt was crushed into dust by him. The blade cut his palm, hit the floor with a clang, but Ye Baiyi appeared to have not felt it. He merely repeated himself, the words separated by pauses, "A death...well-deserved."

Without warning, he turned and left. His figure flashed, and there was no trace of him.

From beginning to end, Zhang Chengling had only grasped some parts of what had been said and had not understood the rest. Seeing that they were all silent, he picked up his courage to ask, "Grandpa, what are you going to do?"

Long Que considered it for a long while. Feeling around for the corner of Zhou Zishu's robes, he said in a low voice, "Young man, do a good deed. Take that sword of yours and deliver me a straightforward and satisfying death. That unfilial bastard Long Xiao did not let me die; now that he's gone to meet the King of Hell, I can also go down there as well, and settle my debts with him!"

Before Zhou Zishu could speak, Wen Kexing approached him, bent down, and carefully supported Long Que's body. Extending his palm, he placed it against Long Que's chest, and said in a solemn and respectful tone of voice rare of him, "I can shatter your meridians in an instant. It'll be satisfyingly straightforward. Senior, consider it carefully."

Long Que roared with laughter. "Sure! Sure, you're accumulating merits by doing a good deed, do it..."

He had just uttered the word "it" when Wen Kexing's fingers that were loosely placed there suddenly exerted force. Before Long Que's laughter stopped, his whole body jerked once, and that smile remained on his face forever.

Not daring to believe it, Zhang Chengling said, stunned, "Grandpa..."

Wen Kexing reached a hand out to close Long Que's eyes, and helped him to lie down. Caressing Zhang Chengling's head, he said, "Don't humiliate him any further. He was a hero, and should die like one."

He paused, then said to Zhou Zishu, "I'd like to stay for a while, as a send-off for him."

Zhou Zishu leant his weight on the bedpost and rose to his feet as he replied, "Sure."

He was about to walk towards the door, but Wen Kexing called out to him, "A-Xu, stay here with me to recuperate from your injury."

Zhou Zishu laughed. "Even if I can recuperate from this one, can I recuperate from the other? Since I can't recuperate from it, I should seize the day and eat, drink, and make merry to my heart's content, it's more worth it that way..."

Wen Kexing lowered his head with a small smile, and said softly, "Then...treat it as spending a few days here with me?"

Zhou Zishu paused in his tracks and remained silent for a good while, before he finally said, "Sure."

Chapter 52 - Mountain Residence

Even until the very last, Wen Kexing was unable to take down Long Que's body from that bed through which a large iron pillar had been staked, and had to set the bed alight as well. He had just murdered someone, and he was now committing arson--he was carrying these evil good deeds through to the end.

Not too far away, Zhang Chengling stood, staring at the rising smoke and soot. Abruptly, his eyes watered, and a deep sense of melancholy inexplicably welled within him. Just then, a hand rested on his shoulder. Vision blurred, Zhang Chengling raised his head to look, only to see Zhou Zishu. Firelight was reflecting off Zhou Zishu's eyes. Zhang Chengling didn't know if he was speaking to him, or murmuring to himself, as he spoke with a conflicted expression, "What are you crying for? All humans will die eventually."

Such was the jianghu. Some laughed and drank freely; the world was theirs to roam as they liked, and they came and went without leaving a trace. Others quietly reached the end of their journey in a desolate place like this one, where only a handful of strangers--each harbouring their own secrets--saw him off on his cold and bleak journey to the netherworld with nothing to say. Every day, there would be youths who were ecstatic at being a step closer to achieving their dreams; every day, there would also be someone who passed on.

Thus, the three of them stayed at the Puppet Manor. Wen Kexing found a large boulder and erected it in front of the little cell, which walls had been blackened by soot. On it, he first carved the date "The eighth day of the twelfth month of the fifty-third year"¹⁵⁰, and claimed that he wanted to take his time writing, till spring came the next year.

Zhou Zishu scoffed without comment, but Zhang Chengling silently rejoiced upon hearing this--a day ago, he had still felt that this place was heavily boobytrapped, and there was no corner of it that was not sinister. Now, however, he felt that this place was like a paradise outside of the mortal world. He didn't have to fight for his life, nor did he have to flee from people hunting him down. Every day, all he had to do was practice martial arts, space out, and suffer his shifu's scoldings...anyway, since his shifu couldn't really chop his head off to use it as a chamberpot, he could scold him however. One fretted less about bills the more they piled up, and one's skin grew thicker the more he was reprimanded--this had always been the one true axiom since ancient times.

There were still a few rooms next to the cell. Some of them were guest rooms, while others looked like servants' quarters, though as they had not been lived in for many years, they had become hopelessly run-down. To demonstrate his filial piety, Zhang Chengling hurried about to clean them--although they were still unsightly, the few of them were used to sleeping rough in the wild, and made do as such.

¹⁵⁰ The ancient Chinese calendar divided time into 60-year cycles.

That night, just as Zhou Zishu had lain down and was drifting off to sleep, he heard the bedroom door creak open. A thread of cold wind rushed in, and the door was quickly closed once more by that person. At that moment, Zhou Zishu was instantly wide awake and lost all trace of drowsiness. Yet, for some unknown reason, he did not open his eyes, as though he was entirely indifferent.

Wen Kexing was hugging his blankets to himself, his smile scummy and lecherous as he stood by his bed and said, "My room is impossible to stay in, there's a puppet in the wall corner with its head covered in cobwebs. It looks like a little tyke, once I open my eyes while lying on the bed, I'm having a staring contest with it..."

Eyes closed, Zhou Zishu interrupted him, "You can turn him around."

Wen Kexing set down the blankets in his arms and said, "I have no interest in puppet butts. Move in a little, make some space for me."

Zhou Zishu didn't say anything else, and played dead.

Wen Kexing lectured, "A-Xu, a person must have compassion for others. You keep saying that you want to do good deeds and accumulate merits, but you're unwilling to even share half of your bed with me after we've been through life-and-death situations together, intimate as we are.¹⁵¹ Is that proper?"

Zhou Zishu opened his eyes and cast a sidelong glance at him. He said, "I didn't feel it was proper just now, but right now, I feel that it's very proper..."

Abruptly, he stopped talking--because Wen Kexing had decided to move faster than his brain could think,¹⁵² and got to work. Stuffing his arms under Zhou Zishu's knees and shoulders, Wen Kexing lifted him, nudged him inwards by three inches, and then joyously planted his own butt down, lying down like a cuckoo that had taken over a magpie's nest.

Once done, he even let out a sigh of deep satisfaction.

At the outset, the bed was not small, but once Wen Kexing had squeezed himself onto it, Zhou Zishu felt that even turning over was difficult. Imperceptibly, his whole body went rigid. Trying hard to pretend as if it was nothing, Zhou Zishu turned over

¹⁵¹ 你侬我侬 is from a poem about the tight bond of love by Yuan dynasty poet Guan Daosheng (a female poet!). I translated it a while back at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/18rkRtAxbkYWJU-3qaJ-DQe4Xgv1ZRKvX16W83YMNzMU/edit>

¹⁵² 心动, apart from "his thoughts", also refers to that feeling when you think you might be developing a crush on someone (something like the Japanese doki doki)

and presented Wen Kexing with his back, and stuffed himself into the blankets as though he couldn't wait to fall asleep. But he had opened his eyes in the instant he had flipped himself over, and now, he felt like he could not close them no matter what.

Wen Kexing seemed to find his bed exceptionally comfortable. One moment he was turning over, and the next he was shifting around like a huge monkey scratching itself. It just so happened that this space was only so small, that a single fart from the other person could shake the bed frame like a small earthquake; able to sense every movement of his, Zhou Zishu suddenly felt a sense of irritation rise within him, and wished that he could kick him off the bed.

After a while, Wen Kexing finally quietened down. Zhou Zishu forced himself to close his eyes, attempting to ignore the person behind him, but he heard Wen Kexing suddenly say, "A-Xu..."

Zhou Zishu ignored him. Then he heard the shuffle of hair against the pillow--that person had probably turned his head back to gaze at his back. Once the thought came, he felt uneasy all along his back, as though there was a little insect crawling along it. Wen Kexing paused. Discovering that Zhou Zishu had no intention of answering him, he extended a claw of Lushan,¹⁵³ rested it lightly on the side of Zhou Zishu's waist, and called softly once more, "A-Xu..."

Instantly, Zhou Zishu's hair stood on their ends. Whipping around in anger, he cursed, "Are you going to sleep? If you aren't, scram, and go chatter at that puppet back in your own room!"

Wen Kexing pillowed his head on his own bent arm. Face turned to the side, he looked at Zhou Zishu, and said with a justified air, "I'm here, but you're going to sleep without saying anything. Don't you know that I have indecent designs on you?"

Inwardly, Zhou Zishu opined that this person had reached such a state of shamelessness that it had no pioneers before him nor would there be any successors after him, and truly could not think of anything to say to him. That paw that Wen Kexing had placed on his waist seemed to faithfully stay where it was, but his fingertips were sporadically caressing the spot. Reflexively, Zhou Zishu thought about slapping his hand away, but one glance at Wen Kexing's fearlessly insouciant demeanour changed his mind. He flipped himself over, lay down with the clear intention of sleeping like the dead, and left him a sentence, "Do as you like."

And, with incomparable willpower, went back to acting like a corpse.

¹⁵³ Originates from the story of Tang dynasty general An Lushan having ~intimate relations~ with the famed Consort Yang (Yang-guifei), where he accidentally clawed at her breast while demanding to suck on it and left marks.

Wen Kexing pestered him for a while more, and upon seeing that Zhou Zishu was indeed a rare expert with an abundance of willpower, he chuckled soundlessly behind his back, and lightly shut his eyes.

Halfway through the night, Wen Kexing abruptly sensed the person beside him twitch most lightly. He woke immediately, knowing that midnight had come.

Perhaps it was the cold weather, and the blankets were not insulating enough--as they slept, they had rolled towards each other. Zhou Zishu's back was slightly curved, making him look as though he was nestled in Wen Kexing's embrace. In the latter half of every night, Zhou Zishu could never fall asleep, and he was long used to this. However, when he opened his eyes and heard someone else breathing next to him, he recalled that there was still such a person beside him. Feeling a little awkward himself, he wanted to shift away unnoticed, but the two internal injuries he had suffered prevented him from summoning the energy to do so. Left with no choice, he gritted his teeth tightly and bore it.

Wen Kexing's brow furrowed. Tightening his arm, he lifted his upper body slightly, and freed a hand to rest it on Zhou Zishu's back. Yet, he did not dare to act rashly, and merely asked in a soft voice, "What is it, does it hurt?"

Zhou Zishu did not say anything, but unconsciously hunched his back even further, his fingers tightening in the sheets--every night, it was this while at midnight when the pain alternated that hurt the most. Once he pulled through it, he could meditate on his own, and tolerate it better.

He closed his eyes. In the coldest of winter nights, sweat beaded finely at the sides of his forehead. He tried his best to slow his breathing and steady it, but even so, Wen Kexing could still hear the unsteady tremble to his breaths.

He quietly pulled Zhou Zishu into his embrace by the shoulders and back. His other arm encircled his waist to let Zhou Zishu rest his head against his chest, and, as though he was hugging a child in the throes of a nightmare, Wen Kexing gently stroked his back to soothe him.

For this rare once, Zhou Zishu acquiesced.

At that moment, they were both awake, but they were both silent. As the neverending night glided past by the window, time and pain seemed incomparably protracted, so protracted that...it demanded to be carved deep into bone as a memory.

Inwardly, Zhou Zishu was a little stupefied. In the day, they purposely pulled dirty tricks on each other to undermine the other party, but in the night, they were like this, as though they only had each other. Wasn't this very erratic?

Chapter 53 - New Year's Celebration

Wen Kexing did as he had promised. He had mounted that large boulder there, made a pleasant-sounding claim that he wanted to take his time writing an epitaph for Old Master Long, and actually “took his time”--like he was embroidering, he carved only ten or so words every day, and even had to scrutinise them from all directions. The lines had to rhyme, the words had to be even and straight, and the script had to be sophisticated. Once he was done writing, he even had to take a few steps back to admire it on his own--with his hands behind his back, his head bobbing in self-affirmation, it was as if he thought himself a living Li Bai or Du Fu.

And then there was actually taking a look at what he had written. He had written plenty, but had gone to town with his creativity and wandered tens of thousands of miles off topic--if he were writing up a contract to purchase a donkey, not even a single hair of the animal would be mentioned within its three long-winded pages. Even Zhang Chengling, upon seeing it, thought that Senior Wen had most probably been too focused composing this epitaph, to the extent that he had forgotten about Old Senior Long.

Zhou Zishu had started wandering the jianghu at a young age, and had always been built tough, able to withstand a beating. After two days of being weak and frail, he resumed his liveliness, and tortured Zhang Chengling by making him train along the tops of walls in the small courtyard of this manor in the mountains. The hardship was beyond words, but the little youth, for fear that his shifu declared his injury healed and that they leave, dared not to gripe one bit.

But it was most likely that this winter was too cold. Even Shuzhong had frozen over, its humans and critters alike a little too lazy to move, and Zhou Zishu had really forgotten about the matter of leaving.

They celebrated the Laba as it passed, then the Lesser New Year.¹⁵⁴ Even though there were only three people in this massive manor, every day was still abound with noise and tumultuous commotion.

When Zhou Zishu had curled up in Wen Kexing's embrace for half the other night, he had scared Wen Kexing into over-cautiousness on the second day--Wen Kexing knew that Zhou Zishu had to be tormented by his injuries, but he had not known that he was tormented this severely. Now, as this heart of Wen Kexing's started to ache on his behalf, he treated Zhou Zishu like a porcelain doll, and didn't dare to tussle nonsensically with him any more.

¹⁵⁴ Laba (腊八), the 8th day of the twelfth month, is a minor festival during which it is customary to eat something called Laba congee (Li Ziqi makes it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u003dBirVBfbQUX4>). On the Lesser New Year (小年), the 23rd/24th day of the twelfth month, households usually carry out spring cleaning and present offerings to the kitchen god.

Yet, after two days of frightfully cautious observation, he discovered that this “Porcelain Doll Zhou” was remorseless to a degree, and was someone who did not keep these instances of agony in mind at all. At the break of dawn every day, once the pain had passed, he seemed to have forgotten it like a critter with a memory span of however short it took to set its paw down--he made fun of others when he should, and cursed when he should. It was as if washing his face could too wash away the exhaustion on it; at breakfast, he was brimming with energy as usual, and his chopsticks continued to fly. He was not the slightest bit stingy in taking food, and was completely operating as per normal.

At that moment, Wen Kexing understood that some people were not fated to lead a pampered life. Coddle him, and he might as well go coddle a pig; what a waste of his feelings.

When Long Xiao had been alive, there had been villagers at the foot of the mountain delivering supplies to the manor every month. Greatly suspicious of others, Long Xiao would work the puppets to retrieve the items and pay, but did not personally meet the villagers.

In a flash, the new year was around the corner. Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing spent most of the day studying the puppet, during which the both of them had battled numerous rounds with their words. After they had each garnered about five different appellations based around the main subject of “good-for-nothing”, they finally discovered that the puppet did not listen to just anybody’s instructions. Thus, Valley Master Wen had to condescend to find his way around with a map in order to collect the festive goods.

Every single time they had come, the simple and honest villagers had seen only artificial puppets. This time round, upon suddenly witnessing a being of flesh and blood descend from the sky before their eyes, they thought that a deity had finally descended to the mortal world. They even prayed repeatedly after his figure, which, within the blink of an eye, vanished without a trace with his peerless qinggong.

The three of them tidied up with joy, and awaited the new year and its celebrations.

What did it mean to celebrate the new year? For a whole year, commoners laboured and toiled, reluctant to eat and wear their best. They yearned for the heavens to spare them a bit of food, yearned for the world to be peaceful in the coming year, yearned for the whole family, old and young, to return and reunite--living was not easy, and as they yearned, it wasn’t as though they did not feel forlorn. It was just that after thousands of years of such a way of life, this bit of forlornness had sunken and settled deep into their bones, and was no longer as easily apparent.

Only on New Year's day, could they let themselves wholly indulge at once--they would hang a few crackling firecrackers to stir up a bustle, and take out all the foodstuffs that they were usually reluctant to devour in order to properly reward themselves.

Even if they had to tighten their belts immediately following the arrival of spring. All year round, they looked forward to this brief chance at indulgence; even if they were utterly penniless, as long as there was still a family, this New Year's Eve¹⁵⁵ had to be celebrated.

Valley Master Wen had never thought that the day where he had to personally cook the New Year's Eve dinner would come during his lifetime. Zhang Chengling used to be a young master, and even though he strongly wished to exhibit his filial piety, he was unfortunately clumsy, and was unable to fulfill these duties even as he wished to. As for Zhou Zishu--he used to be a lord, and still continued loafing around like one now.

Wen Kexing felt that this event was worth commemoration, and so invested great effort in this, scurrying to and fro busily. First of all, he pointed at Zhang Chengling and instructed, "Little tyke, go slaughter the chicken."

Freezing, Zhang Chengling looked at the chicken clucking wildly off to the side, then pointed at himself and asked, "Senior, me? ...Slaughter...it?"

Humoured, Wen Kexing said, "Can it slaughter you? Hurry, the chicken has to go on the stove early, the taste will only sink in after a long simmer."

Nervously, Zhang Chengling picked up the knife, and tiptoed over. Summoning his courage, he raised his arms, clenched his teeth as he closed his eyes, and swung the knife down. That chicken hopped to the side, wings flapping, and avoided the blow. It straightened its neck and shrieked once, like it had the intention to battle him to the death.

Zhang Chengling took a cautious step forward, steeled himself, and reached out to grab it. The chicken, able to tell that he only looked tough on the outside, jumped up ferociously, and pecked at his hand. Frightened, Zhang Chengling jerked his hand back and retreated. Given an inch, the chicken took a mile, and chased close behind. Between the human and the chicken, it was unclear which one was trying to slaughter the other; they started flailing about in the small courtyard, clucking and wailing.

Zhou Zishu squatted at the kitchen door with a stalk of dried grass sticking out of his mouth, watching him with much enjoyment. Seeing that he was idling, Wen

¹⁵⁵ New Year's Eve is closely associated with reunion--on this day, the family usually gets together to eat dinner and usher in the New Year.

Kexing stuck his foot out and poked him with the tip of his shoe, instructing, “Cattle knife,¹⁵⁶ go slaughter the chicken.”

Zhou Zishu cocked an eyebrow and glanced at him. To the side, Zhang Chengling yowled, “Shifu, save me!”

And so in the end, Lord Zhou did not say anything, and obediently went to slaughter the chicken. He was efficient at killing people, and was similarly efficient at slaughtering animals - the brave rooster warrior finally wilted in his hands, and did not even have the chance to leave any last words before it perished. Zhou Zishu’s skill at de-gutting was unparalleled; not a while later, he had cleaned the chicken, washed his hands, and returned with nothing else to do yet again.

Wen Kexing looked at his finished product, and silently quipped to himself that this person was of such utmost virtue. Then, as he chopped the vegetables, he ordered, “Light a fire under the stove.”

There was a motionless puppet standing next to the stove with its head lowered; evidently, these chores in this place were usually not completed by humans. As he picked the puppet up and set it aside, Zhou Zishu heard Wen Kexing spare a moment from his hustling and bustling about to tease, “That unfilial child Long really doesn’t know how to enjoy things. When one eats, one should eat something handmade by a human being. It has soul and flavour to it, and it might even have love...”

He cast a flirtatious look at Zhou Zishu, and said, “When you taste it later tonight, you’ll be able to tell.”

Zhou Zishu ignored him. He squatted on the ground to examine the stove as though he was facing a great enemy, and picked up the fire tongs in a clumsy hold. Yet, no matter how he held it, he found it awkward, and changed his grip again, examining it a few times over.

After waiting for a long while only to receive no response, Wen Kexing tilted his head to take a look, and couldn’t restrain himself from saying, “That’s enough, what’re you getting from gazing at it lovingly? Hurry up and light the fire.”

Since when had Zhou Zishu ever done something like this? He naturally assumed that he should bring in a bundle of firewood and stuff it into the base of the stove. Then he tilted his head, and saw that the base was not completely filled. Thinking that it would be troublesome to add more firewood later on, and desiring to do all the work now so that he would not have to later, he came up with the brilliant idea to carry another bundle over, stuffed all of it into the base of the stove, and lit it.

¹⁵⁶ 牛刀割雞 (lit. “Using a knife meant for slaughtering cattle to kill a chicken”) refers to overkill

This was disastrous. Even before the sparks appeared, black smoke emerged first. However, he dodged quickly enough, raising the tongs and taking a huge step backwards as he stared at the stove uncomprehendingly. Hurrying over to salvage the situation, Wen Kexing scraped out more than half of the firewood, turned his head aside to cough twice, and said, "Hell, are you trying to burn the house down?"

Zhou Zishu fell silent for a beat, then, acting as though he knew what he was saying, persisted in casting his judgement with a justified air, "This firewood is of poor quality. The smoke's so heavy, the wood's probably too wet." He, too, was invited out of the kitchen without explanation by Wen Kexing, who had tears streaming down his face. He and Zhang Chengling stared at each other, and sat around waiting for food.

The sky had darkened completely by the time Wen Kexing finally finished preparing a whole table's worth of a New Year's Eve feast. It was growing colder outside; the northwestern wind rattled the window lattices non-stop, but the room was toasty from the few small stoves inside the house. A fragrance was rising gradually from the wine warming on the stove. Zhang Chengling rapturously carried the dishes one by one to the table; when he sat down, he felt like he had been hypnotised by the steam.

He had thought that he would never have a home again, that he was destined to be a penniless vagrant for life. Yet, who would have known that he still had the chance to celebrate the New Year so properly? He felt most of the forlornness in his heart scatter; gazing at Zhou Zishu, then at Wen Kexing eagerly, he reflected that the heavens had probably smiled down on him.

Zhou Zishu had always been a wine-lover, and was tempted by the smell of the wine at this moment. He first poured a cup for himself, dropped his gaze, brought it to his nose and smelled it for a long while, before finally taking a mouthful of it. He felt that though this farmer's homebrew was no top brand, it had a pure fragrance that was indescribable, and when it melted on the tongue, it warmed him on the inside the whole way down.

He recalled that at this time in the past years, the capital was the liveliest. There was the night market, the Lunar Maiden performing her song on the Moon-Gazing River, and with the evening curfew on the city lifted for New Year's--it was most bustling. But even the high-grade wine in that cup, aged for decades, seemed to have been stained with the scent of rouge; while he tasted it on his tongue, he always had other things on his mind, and the wine would lose its taste. That wine had never been as fragrant as this.

Out of the blue, a pair of chopsticks reached into his bowl, and dropped some food into it. Taken aback, Zhou Zishu raised his head, and saw Wen Kexing--who usually took pleasure in snatching things from people--looking at him with a gentle and warm smile on his face, saying, "Eat something, drunkard."

At this, he felt like someone had lightly plucked at a heartstring of his.

Suddenly, Wen Kexing sighed, and mused, "This is the most proper New Year's I've celebrated in my life."

Zhang Chengling did not know about the origins of this mysterious figure, and listened in confusion, only to hear Wen Kexing continue, "In previous years, on this day, I did no more than deal with a bunch of people who either wanted to get on my good side or who had nefarious intentions, then drink a few cups of wine with Gu Xiang as an observance, the two of us. We don't have anything to talk about either, and we muddle through another New Year's just like that."

He shook his head. "If you don't have a family, what are you celebrating New Year's for? You're only looking to make yourself upset."

In Zhang Chengling's eyes, this Senior Wen instantly turned into a pitiful person with a tragic background, and he started to sympathise with him. However, Zhou Zishu looked at him with a slight trace of a smirk and said, "What about your femal...male intimates?"

Wen Kexing said, "One pays money to get drunk, the other sells his smiles and body--how can that be any kind of celebration? A-Xu, we're celebrating the new year nicely, don't get jealous."

Zhou Zishu very much wanted to splash him with the wine, but ultimately could not bear to do so. After much hesitation, he still splashed it into his own mouth.

After a feisty reunion dinner, Zhang Chengling found a string of firecrackers from somewhere and lit it in the courtyard. Red and blazing, the firecrackers marked the passing of a year; he started to laugh aloud like an untroubled youth.

Zhou Zishu sat on the steps, downing one cup after another. Wen Kexing sat down too, abruptly reached out a hand, and snatched his wine cup. Slanting his gaze at him, he smiled, purposely located the place where his lips had just touched, and downed the remaining half of the wine. Once he was done, he even lapped at the rim of the cup, as though it had not been enough to sate him.

Zhou Zishu turned his head aside to look away from him, feeling his earlobes heat up. Smiling cheerily, Wen Kexing took his hand, and pulled it into his own embrace to warm it.

In his heart, he felt that this was the happiest New Year's celebration that he had ever had in his life.

Chapter 54 - A Rude Awakening

Night had come.

Winter had passed. It was the period where cold snaps made their occasional reappearance as the weather warmed; amongst the fresh scent of nature, a hint of chill seeped through, especially apparent close to the water.

The river, which had just thawed, flowed by silently. By it stood a man in crimson with a blood-red birthmark the size of a palm over his cheek--he was none other than the Delighted Mourning Ghost Sun Ding. His face was turned aside to monitor his surroundings closely. One of his hands was splayed open, fingers slightly curled as it hung by his side. Under the light of the moon, a lustre that did not resemble that of ordinary skin reflected clearly off it.

Out of the blue, a few dark figures barrelled towards him. Sun Ding rose into the air, and swiftly engaged in a brawl with these men clothed in black garb.

Among the ten most abominable Ghosts of the Ghost Valley, though the "Delighted Mourning Ghost", "Hanged Ghost", and the "Ghost of Impermanence" were at the top, this did not mean that the other villainous characters were not skilled. These people had merely put down roots in the Ghost Valley long ago; they knew how to get people on their side and quash others, and had already become forces in their own right.

While Delighted Mourning Ghost Sun Ding's Raksha Palms were not at a level of skill that would have gone unmatched by any who came before or after him, they were, at least, a unique technique in the pugilist world of the Central Plains at present. Those who were struck died instantly within three steps. A blood-red palm print would be left on the corpse, from the front of the chest over the heart all the way through to the back. The technique was domineeringly formidable.

Though suddenly besieged late at night, he was not panicked. As though he was not afraid in the slightest, a pair of wicked palms hurtled in all directions, weaving a tight, all-encompassing formation. To him, they were mere bugs that had overestimated their abilities; before long, they fled, too weak to withstand even one blow. Yet, Sun Ding didn't give chase, but merely bent down and rucked up the clothes of one corpse. Glimpsing the ghost mask tattooed on the waist, he scoffed coldly.

Approximately less than half a shichen later, a man appeared from behind him and walked over. He frowned, bent to look at the ghost mask on the corpse's waist, and asked, "What happened?"

Sun Ding kept his hands back in his sleeves, swept a cool gaze over him, and said, "Lao Meng, you're late."

--This Lao Meng was none other than the assistant Gu Xiang had gotten to dig that day, when Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing had been deep in the enemy's lair. As usual, he was wearing common coarse clothes of cotton and linen. When he walked fast, one could tell that the left leg of this man was slightly lame, though it was not obvious and could only be identified upon very close observation. His features were plain; if he did not have a serious expression on, he even looked a little kind. His front was covered by a large apron usually seen on pig slaughterers--just as Wen Kexing had ordered, he had really changed into a butcher's outfit.

Lao Meng plucked the mask from that corpse's face, squatted on the ground to turn his thoughts over in his mind for a moment, then sighed and stood. Shaking his head, he said, "It's Xue Fang's lackey."

Raising his head, he saw Sun Ding staring at his large apron in interest, and explained, "I changed into this as per the Valley Master's command. Does Sun-xiong have any opinion about this?"

Sun Ding scoffed coldly, and said, "The Valley Master? Is that unweaned brat who won't be siring any descendants worth your scurrying back and forth to ingratiate yourself with him like a lapdog?¹⁵⁷"

Lao Meng's expression did not change, and merely said after he listened to him speak, "You can say that in his presence."

As though he had recalled something, the corner of Sun Ding's eye twitched, and he humphed coldly. Wisening up, he dropped this topic of conversation, pointing to the corpse on the ground as he said, "Since it is so, Lao Meng, why don't you report this to the Valley Master? Let him know how brazen that Xue Fang is: apart from breaking the rule by exiting the Valley without permission, he currently even wants to kill me out of humiliated anger."

Lao Meng frowned, and said, "I have not been able to contact the Valley Master of late..."

Impatient, Sun Ding asked, "What about that lass Purple Danger?"

Lao Meng shook his head again, and only asked, "Do you think Xue Fang is doing this for the Lapis Armour this time round too?"

When he mentioned the two words "Lapis Armour", the light in Sun Ding's eyes swiftly flickered once. Then he looked elsewhere, and said, "Xue Fang is very

¹⁵⁷ More specifically, he compares him to a Pekingese. Peking as a concept, however, didn't exist until the Ming dynasty, when the Forbidden City was finally constructed.

ambitious. I advise that you...and that Valley Master of yours, best operate cautiously. Otherwise...hmph.”

Lao Meng was silent for a while, then he suddenly asked, “Were you the one who killed Shen Zhen?”

Hearing this, Sun Ding paused, raised an eyebrow, and asked in a drawl, “What, are you probing me for information?”

Lao Meng smiled ambiguously, and extended a finger to poke him in the chest. Lowering his voice, he said, “Sun-xiong, let us, as honest men, talk openly. Who doesn’t want the Lapis Armour? It’s not only the Hanged Ghost--the minor ghosts at the bottom are scheming to get in on the action as well. Even Long-Tongued Ghost, that thing, dared to set up the underground cave trap, putting his life on the line to do the Valley Master in...the person who acquires the Lapis Armour will be the next master of Fengya Mountain. If you don’t want it, why are you keeping your eye on that little thing surnamed Zhang?”

Sun Ding choked. After a long while, he finally managed to say, “That’s because I want to make that Zhang lad point Xue Fang out as the culprit!”

Lao Meng looked at him and merely smiled without comment. Sun Ding had always hated Lao Meng’s smile, as he felt that this person smiled as though he was hiding numerous important secrets; like that demented master of his, Wen Kexing, it was impossible for others to tell what he was thinking. Impatient, he asked, “Ghost of Impermanence, what do you mean by this?”

Lao Meng shook his head, and said with a smile, “This, Sun-xiong does not have to worry about. That Zhang kid is with the Valley Master now. As long as he recalls it, he can point out the culprit any time--since Shen Zhen is dead, and the two pieces of Lapis Armour in the Gao Family Manor have disappeared without a trace, I say it’s best if we apprehend Xue Fang first, then make a decision. What do you say?”

Sun Ding narrowed his eyes. His fierce gaze regarded that peaceful face for a while, then he humphed coldly, turned, and left.

At this moment, within the Puppet Manor enclosed by the thousands of great mountains in Shuzhong, the Valley Master Wen they spoke of was currently fighting Zhou Zishu for a blanket.

Spring had arrived, and Shuzhong grew warm even more quickly. The excuse of “the cloth covers, many years used, were cold as iron”¹⁵⁸ was clearly rubbish now;

¹⁵⁸ From Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu’s A Song on How My Thatched Roof Was Ruined by the Autumn Wind. An English translation can be found here: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/41819902>

Zhou Zishu had even specially instructed Zhang Chengling to tidy a room for this wandering swindler by the surname of Wen, but he still could not stop him from worming in on the dot.

Moreover, this person took advantage of his courtesy to be even more brazen: from the luggage he'd brought along in the beginning, he had turned increasingly shameless and now came over bare-handed, mooching off him for bed and blanket like it was only natural to do so.

A ratty blanket, tugged to and fro between two people. Be it the Qinna Locks or the Zhanyi Throws, a myriad of forms and styles of martial arts--as long as it was close at hand, they tried and tested them all.¹⁵⁹ In the end, the both of them were close to sweating all over, and were warm enough to do without the blanket.

Ultimately, Zhou Zishu was no longer at the peak of his strength, and lost to him by a move after a hundred and ten or so rounds. Wen Kexing smugly clutched at the bigger half of the blanket with one hand, while his other hand pressed Zhou Zishu's wrist onto the pillow. Retracting his neck, he flashed a mouth of pearly white teeth at him, rejoicing, and even beckoned at him as he said, "A-Xu, come here. I'll cuddle you to sleep--you won't be cold for sure."

Zhou Zishu very much wanted to kick him off the bed, so he looked him up and down, scoffed coldly, and said, "You're neither perfumed nor soft, and your chest is a whole fucking row of ribs. Cuddle you? I might as well go cuddle with the bed base."

Wen Kexing glared at him immediately. Grabbing Zhou Zishu's hand, he placed it on his own chest, and said, "Nonsense! I'm not a row of ribs, if you don't believe it, feel it yourself!"

Zhou Zishu kicked Wen Kexing on the knee and rescinded his hand, shaking it in mid-air as if he'd touched something dirty. Clutching the blanket to himself, Wen Kexing peered at him and tutted in amazement, "Bizarre things happen all the time. The one who was taken advantage of doesn't even mind, while you, the one who took advantage, insist so hopelessly on restraint. Usually, in this kind of situation..."

Zhou Zishu did not intend to listen to his continued nonsense. He donned his clothes, deciding that if he couldn't afford to cross him, he could afford to hide, and

¹⁵⁹ Qinna Locks (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chin_Na) and the Zhanyi Throws (<https://www.bilibili.com/video/av19520303/>). 十八般武艺 refers to a myriad of forms and styles, but one Ming dynasty source (out of many sources) suggests it consists of: bow, crossbow, flexible spear, sabre, sword, military spear, shield, hatchet, axe, polearm/halberd, whip, swordbreaker, pickaxe, stake, bident, trident, rope, and bare hands. [One museum classifies the 2nd and 3rd images as hatchets and the 4th, 5th, 6th as axes: <https://kknews.cc/zh-sg/culture/vmrzkjy.html>]

change rooms to sleep in. At the very least, he could squeeze with Zhang Chengling, and order that little tyke to sleep on the floor.

Yet, the hand that Wen Kexing was clutching the blanket with suddenly shot out at an eerily unnatural angle and found its way up Zhou Zishu's shoulder. Zhou Zishu immediately sunk his shoulder and bent his elbow, intending to knock his hand off. Abruptly, half his body went numb, and before he could get to his feet, he fell and landed right into Wen Kexing's open arms, which had been waiting for him. The shell of a sunflower seed landed on the blanket...so it was this object he had been ambushed by.

With a cheeky smile, Wen Kexing continued next to his ear, "Usually, in this sort of situation, most people act in such a guilty manner because their lust is unsated. See, you've flung yourself into my arms, haven't you?"

Zhou Zishu was speechless. For the life of him, he could not figure out why someone, about to sleep at night, would still equip himself with the shells of sunflower seeds, and use them as hidden weapons to attack others at any time.

Wen Kexing smiled like a crook, and as though he could tell what Zhou Zishu was thinking, he added, "Actually, I have walnuts with me too. Do you want some?"

At the mention of the word "walnut", goosebumps rose all over Zhou Zishu. Looking stronger than he felt, he mustered up a smile and said, "You are cuddling me without letting go, what, do you still want to service me for the night?"

Wen Kexing swept him under the blanket with a glint in his eye, as the two hands pressing down on Zhou Zishu's shoulders went seeking down the hems of his inner robe. He was quick to say with joy, "I couldn't ask for more, I couldn't ask for more."

As Wen Kexing had not been too heavy-handed in execution, Zhou Zishu's acupoints unblocked a mere moment later, right at the moment when Wen Kexing's hand happened to be moving increasingly inappropriately. Ever since he had left the capital and entered the jianghu, Zhou Zishu had, indeed, not been intimate with anyone--for one, he was injured, and for another, with problems coming one after another, he hadn't been in the mood to. Wen Kexing's light teasing felt like he was lighting trails of fire all over his body; right when things seemed to be almost veering out of control, Zhou Zishu grabbed his wrist, and said through gritted teeth, "The Valley Master's deep love, I'll have to...apologise--for--refusing--it."

Smiling, Wen Kexing said, "You don't have to be so polite. It's wrong of you to do so, as rejecting someone's gift is a sign of disrespect."

Zhou Zishu squeezed out a stiff smile. "I am not worthy of this gift."

Just as they were in the middle of a stalemate, they suddenly heard a shout from Zhang Chengling's room next door. Zhou Zishu's brow furrowed. Pushing Wen Kexing away, he put on his outer robe with lightning-quick speed, rose, and fled. Wen Kexing shook his head and sighed. Bringing his five fingers near the tip of his nose, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply in intoxicated pleasure, before slowly following him out.

Zhang Chengling had merely been trapped in the throes of a nightmare. When Zhou Zishu pushed the door open and entered, he discovered him with his eyes tightly shut, mumbling something Zhou Zishu could not discern. He had worked up a sweat from kicking and flailing about. Zhou Zishu pushed at him, but found that he could not wake him. He held his wrist, channelling a thin thread of qi into him, and only then did Zhang Chengling tremble all over with a shout, "Don't kill him!"

Then he bolted upright into a sitting position. Slowly, the fear in his eyes dissipated, and an expression of slight confusion appeared on his face. He looked at Zhou Zishu, and called in a daze, "Shifu..."

Zhou Zishu patted his head, and pressed him back down without a word. Tugging his covers back into place over him, he said, "Go to sleep." Then he sat by the bed, leaning against the bedpost, arms crossed in front of his chest as he closed his eyes to rest, as though he was staying by his side.

For a long while, Zhang Chengling was silent, then tugged lightly at Zhou Zishu's clothes and said in a small voice, "Shifu, just now I dreamt about...a person who was cloaked completely from head to toe holding a knife, he rested it against the throat of my father's second wife, and forcefully questioned my father "where is it". Was that..."

Zhou Zishu opened his eyes. At this moment, the door was pushed open from the outside, and Wen Kexing walked in. Upon hearing this, his expression grew serious, and asked as he thought about it, "What did that person look like? Did he have any features of note?"

Zhang Chengling thought for a long while, and shook his head remorsefully. "I couldn't see it clearly in my dream..."

Zhou Zishu recalled the sentence that the Delighted Mourning Ghost had forcefully questioned the youth with that day, and a thought struck him. He asked, "Did you notice if that person's hand had five fingers, or four?"

Zhang Chengling shook his head again, looking at him with wide eyes. Zhou Zishu sighed, patted his head, and said softly, "Go to sleep..."

One stood and the other sat, but both were silent. When Zhang Chengling's breathing had finally evened out, the boy evidently asleep, Zhou Zishu tugged his blankets into place, stood, and exited with Wen Kexing.

All of a sudden, Wen Kexing sighed. Reaching out to hug him from behind, he buried his face into his shoulder, and a long while later, finally said in a quiet voice, "These days have been like a good dream...but why do we wake so soon?"

*Volume Three. She has sewn gold thread on wedding robes for
other girls*

Chapter 55 - Eavesdrop

Traversing the bridle path along the grassy plains by the Yiluo River; though the verdant garden remained evergreen, the passers-by grow old.¹⁶⁰ In the legends, a myriad of songstresses from Yan Zhao played their shengs in melodious harmony on the golden terraces. The wind rose from the east of Luoyang, and drifted past the west.¹⁶¹

The neverending cries of the troubled commoners, like cuckoo calls, had ceased. A man, with wine by his side, succumbed to the long haze of drink.

At the site of the eastern capital, its splendor was long past. There were a few thin horses on the state road,¹⁶² ambling leisurely.

The two men were both of slender and elegant build, but one of them vaguely had a sickly pallor to his countenance. A wine flask hung at his waist, though he was in no hurry to drink; he merely held it in hand, swirling it occasionally. When he took a sip, he held it in his mouth for a while to savour it, before swallowing it slowly, his thoughts inscrutable to the onlooker. A simple and honest-looking youth followed behind them.

This was none other than Zhou Zishu and his company, who had just exited Shuzhong.

¹⁶⁰ From 望海潮·洛阳怀古 (Gazing At The Tides·Reminiscing Luoyang) by Northern Song dynasty poet Qin Guan. English translation here: <https://m.kekenet.com/kouyi/201506/382686.shtml>

¹⁶¹ From 四望楼 (lit. 'watchtower') by Tang dynasty poet Cao Ye. I can't find a English translation or Mandarin explanation for this poem, but it describes a lord of Luoyang losing himself in glamorous pleasure and ignoring the commoners' suffering.

¹⁶² 官道: The ancient Chinese network of roads consisted of legitimate roads for government use, wide enough for horses to run along so that supplies could be transported.

Watching from the side, Wen Kexing discovered that this person took one sip after another, and in a short amount of time, had reached the bottom of such a large flask. He could not stop himself from reaching out just as Zhou Zishu tipped it into his mouth again, restraining his forearm, and said, "Isn't that about enough, drunkard?"

Zhou Zishu cast a sideways glance at him, switched the wine flask to his other hand, and said, "You're sticking your nose into so much of my business. Are you my wife?"

Wen Kexing stretched out a hand to grab his flask, and said with a serious expression still, "We've even had intimate, skin-on-skin contact. Are you planning to abandon me now after you've toyed with me?"

Zhou Zishu countered his moves as they came, smiling as he replied, "I'm afraid that you will be widowed."

Without caring that Zhang Chengling was still present, Wen Kexing continued shamelessly, "That's fine, because anyway, at present, you let me look and touch, but not do--I lie awake every night, widowed even though you're alive."

Zhou Zishu's hand slipped, and the flask was nicked by Wen Kexing.

Zhang Chengling tagged along closely behind them, head lowered. He wanted to burrow himself into a crack in the ground.

Seizing his flask, Wen Kexing took a large swig from it, slanted a gaze at Zhou Zishu and smiled, saying, "The wine can't be considered good wine, but the taste is truly...quite good, quite good."

Zhou Zishu looked at him woodenly for a moment, then abruptly spurred the horse to move closer to him, and spoke right next to his ear, "Is this because my wife is unsated, and lonely at night? This husband has treated you poorly. Tonight, wash up and wait for me. I'll call on you for sure..."

Lost in his fantasies as he listened, Wen Kexing's hand closed around empty air--the wine flask had been nicked right back.

Mimicking his actions, Zhou Zishu slanted a glance at him. The corners of his eyes were slightly long and narrow, but when his gaze drifted over, there was not one trace of bewitchment to it; instead, it had a sense of lively mischief. Smugly, he raised that wine flask and swirled it a few times in Wen Kexing's direction, then took a large swig in satisfaction.

However, he suddenly felt something small and hard slide into his mouth. Pausing in alarm, Zhou Zishu spat that thing out, and nearly leapt from the horse's back--it was a small chunk of walnut!

It made Zhou Zishu lose his appetite, as if it had not been a small chunk of walnut he spat from his mouth, but a chunk of human brain. Glaring at Wen Kexing furiously, he seethed, "You scumbag!"

Instantly, Wen Kexing put his hands together in a bow and replied humbly, "No, no, you're too polite, you're too polite!"

Face pale, Zhou Zishu pointed at him and said, "You..." He felt his stomach roil, repulsed at the thought, but simply could not stop his thoughts from veering towards the repulsive.

Leisurely, Wen Kexing came over to take his hand. Sticking his tongue out, he curled it over Zhou Zishu's palm, sweeping the small chunk of kernel away. He chewed a few times with relish, laughed, and said, "Husband, you're already a grown adult. How can you be picky about food? This is too unbecoming."

Silently, Zhou Zishu turned his face aside, and did not look at him. After a long while, he said faintly, "I want a divorce..."

Wen Kexing laughed uproariously.

Zhang Chengling watched these two old jokesters, his face blooming crimson and lush green. After a long while, he finally mustered up his courage, inched up to them, and stammered, "Shi-shifu, w-why are we going to Luo-luoyang?"

Zhou Zishu had not suppressed his disgust yet; glancing at Zhang Chengling with a pale face that was a little green, he said waspishly, "We're going to find out who's after your life."

Zhang Chengling looked at him dumbly, mouth gaping, and asked, "Ah?"

Wen Kexing held the reins of his horse loosely in one hand, while his other came up to rub his own chin. He asked, "At that time, there were two parties who separately hired two waves of Scorpions, wanting this little tyke's life..."

Zhou Zishu cut him off. "The red-clothed Delighted Mourning Ghost was likely not intending to kill him. If he had wanted to, he would have done so earlier. He wouldn't have spent so much time talking nonsense with him."

Wen Kexing turned his head around, gazing at him in thought, and said, "So, you're thinking of rooting out the people behind that batch of Poisonous Scorpion suicide warriors? Can it be...that you've come here in order to locate that bunch of Poisonous Scorpions? Can it be that the Poisonous Scorpions' den is in Luoyang?"

Zhang Chengling gazed at Wen Kexing adoringly, finding this senior really too clever, as he could deduce paragraphs upon paragraphs from a small morsel of information. Zhou Zishu humphed coldly, and said, "Do you talk so much nonsense just to demonstrate that you're a little more capable than that little tyke?"

Wen Kexing was thick-skinned, and ignored it completely. He continued asking, "Can it be that you know where the Poisonous Scorpions' den is?" Reflexively, Zhou Zishu went to take another sip of wine. He brought it to his mouth, but recalled what that Wen scumbag had put in the flask, and had no choice but to set it down again. In his whole life, he abhorred others ruining good wine the most; glaring at Wen Kexing venomously, he said coldly, "Just because you don't know about it doesn't mean that I'm unaware of it."

Wen Kexing hastily sweet-talked him, "That is so, that is so. Lord Zhou is of divine brilliance and has numerous aces up his sleeve. How can such an ordinary commoner like me ever aspire to reach your lofty level?"

Zhou Zishu felt that he was a glib talker who brought his nonsense with him everywhere he went, and wanted to punch him badly. Then he thought about it, felt like he might not be able to beat him in a fight, and turned his head aside in a wise decision, ignoring him.

The three people made their way into Luoyang City. After they had filled their stomachs at an inn and rested sufficiently, Zhou Zishu called Zhang Chengling into his room.

At first, Zhang Chengling did not understand the purpose of the order, and ran over joyfully. Yet, without warning, Zhou Zishu's palm hurtled towards his shoulder. Instantly, Zhang Chengling knew that this was another of his shifu's impromptu tests; unable to counter it in time, he bent and ducked away, squirming underneath Zhou Zishu's arm ungracefully.

Zhou Zishu frowned. He was discovering that this little tyke had some sort of talent: no matter how elegant and dazzling a move looked, when it came to him, it would be as hopelessly sloppy as a donkey rolling on the ground. But if he were to say that it was incorrect, there were no errors with the moves he executed. He sat unmoving, and with a flip of his palm, encircled Zhang Chengling.

Zhang Chengling yelped "Aiya", and fell flat on his back with a plonk. Spine shuffling against the floor, he wriggled on the floor a few times like a mudskipper, jumping to his feet in a scramble. He stepped on the small table with a loud bang and avoided Zhou Zishu's third blow, then leapt again like a huge toad. His four limbs touched the ground at the same time, but he lost his balance when he flipped himself over, and fell onto the floor on his ass. Using his legs to slide himself a few steps

back, he dodged a kick that Zhou Zishu swept at him--surprisingly, his movements could be considered 'as fluid as drifting clouds and flowing streams'.

But he infuriated Zhou Zishu, who pointed to him and said, "How many benefits did the innkeeper promise you, for you to be wiping the floor for him so dedicatedly?"

Sheepishly, Zhang Chengling got to his feet, wiping at his nose with his sleeve. Shrinking back into himself, he looked at Zhou Zishu and said in a small voice, "Senior, Senior Wen said that...any move that can save your life is a good move, that when you fight, you can't stick to a sequence of moves, and if you forget, to improvise and adapt under desperate circumstances...¹⁶³"

Zhou Zishu raged, "Wen Kexing, get in here. Your own techniques are warped from improper teaching--do you still want to miseducate others, and teach others to develop warped techniques like yours?"

At this moment, Wen Kexing was leaning against the doorframe, a standing bystander to the show. He had another packet of walnuts that he had gotten ahold of from somewhere in hand, and his mouth was stuffed full of walnut kernel; when he spoke, the words were muffled and unclear. Upon hearing this, he raised a sleeve to cover half his face, looked at Zhou Zishu with an expression of resentment, and said in a trembling voice, "Husband, are...are you holding this wife in contempt?"

Zhang Chengling gazed at this Senior Wen in sympathy, feeling that while Senior Wen couldn't be presented in public, he could at least take care of the domestic realm; although his behaviour was a little improper, he could fight and was built tough. He was truly a rare talent, but was still held in contempt by his shifu--he was really pitiful.

Zhou Zishu did not wish to talk any more inane nonsense with them, and told Zhang Chengling, "Remain here at the inn on your own for a few days, and wait for me. I am going to investigate the Poisonous Scorpions' territory."

Zhang Chengling volunteered, "Shifu, I'll come with you!"

Zhou Zishu said, "Come along to be a burden?"

Zhang Chengling pouted, his expression mournful and his tone one of unwillingness to part with him as he said in a small voice, "Shifu..."

Zhou Zishu kicked him on the thigh, and said, "Do you still want someone to suckle you? Get out. If your gongfu is still in such poor form by the time I return, I'll break your leg."

¹⁶³ Wen Kexing: Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.

Mournfully, Zhang Chengling left after being chased away. He counted on his fingers, but could not figure out how many times he would have his leg broken in one day, desperately wishing that he could turn into a centipede.

Seeing that Zhou Zishu was walking towards the door, Wen Kexing immediately sprang at him, saying, "I'll go with you..."

Immediately, Zhou Zishu recoiled to dodge him, stopping him with a finger on his chest. He looked at the packet of walnuts in his hand with a baleful gaze, treating both Wen Kexing and the walnuts alike as venomous pests.¹⁶⁴

Wen Kexing simpered, balled up the paper lump containing the walnuts in a couple of movements and stuffed it into his robes. He rubbed his hands forcefully, then followed after him obediently.

Following Zhou Zishu, Wen Kexing made his way to the outskirts of Luoyang City, turned into a small alley, passing a small copse of lush plants, and crossed through onto a street. Wen Kexing raised his head, and felt that this place could not be more familiar to him--with its dim and amorous lighting, the fragrance of flowers and wine drifting, this was clearly a brothel.

His expression turned odd. Pointing at the songstress who was singing as she played her instrument on the upper level of the building, he asked, "The Poisonous Scorpions' den...is i-in this sort of place?"

Zhou Zishu glanced at him, and teased, "That's enough, you can stop pretending to be morally decent. As if Valley Master Wen is an unsullied lotus flower that remains pure though having grown amidst mud."

He was just about to lift his foot and enter, but Wen Kexing pulled at him hastily, saying in a small voice, "Isn't it because...you're already a married man, Husband Zhou?"

Zhou Zishu gripped his jaw. Wen Kexing looked at him with a shy but loving gaze. Zhou Zishu shivered, and evaluated, "Wife Wen, you gross me out too much."

Then he released him, and slipped away among the throng of guests seeking pleasure.

Wen Kexing muttered, "Fine, you even dare commit adultery right in front of my face, treating me as though I'm dead. I'll show you what the roar of an irascible

¹⁶⁴ More specifically "the five venomous creatures and four pests" (五毒四害): the former five are scorpion, snake, centipede, lizard, and toad, while the latter four are rat, cockroach, fly, and ant.

wife¹⁶⁵ is like.”

He inhaled deeply, gathering his emotions and letting them stew suitably. Just as he was about to give a great shout, he deflated and shook his head, resigning himself to lift his foot and follow. He even assuaged himself by saying, “The Three Obediences and Four Virtues, The Three Obediences and Four Virtues,¹⁶⁶ ai!”

As he was highly skilled, Zhou Zishu was bold, rising into the air before the very eyes of the public. The fat man in front of him, his vision blurred by drink, only felt a small breeze glide past; sobering a little, he raised his head to look, but did not glimpse a single figure. Wen Kexing followed close behind Zhou Zishu. The two of them stepped lightly across the tiles on the roof of the brothel underfoot, gliding across without pausing for a single step.

Thereafter, Zhou Zishu spun through the air in a beautiful arc and landed in a small backyard. Wen Kexing regarded their surroundings, the continuous noises of pleasure from those promiscuous young men and women still reaching his ears, and thought with some interest, If the Poisonous Scorpions' den is in such a place, they must be constantly insatiable.

Zhou Zishu slunk along the base of the walls,¹⁶⁷ concentrating as he listened an earful at the base of every room and discerned the sounds with great attention. Wen Kexing was utterly amazed, feeling that this person was truly impressive to be able to eavesdrop with such an expression of propriety.

Then Zhou Zishu stopped behind a room, made a “it’s here” gesture at Wen Kexing and paused there, unmoving.

Focusing, Wen Kexing listened, and instantly understood the trick to this--he knew that Zhou Zishu was not listening to the human voices, but the creaking of the bed frame inside the room.

So he came close, pressing himself tight to Zhou Zishu on purpose, and together, they listened to the earth-shattering moans of the maiden in the room.

¹⁶⁵ 河东狮吼 literally translates to “the lioness’ roar”, and is usually used to describe a wife whose husband fears her.

¹⁶⁶ 三从四德: Confucian code of conduct governing morality and social behaviour for maidens and married women. Even prostitutes had to follow these principles.

¹⁶⁷ Eavesdropping in Chinese is 听墙根, which literally translates to “listening at the base of walls”

Chapter 56 - Black Crow

After returning to his room, Zhang Chengling tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep. The shadows of the tree with budding branches by the window fell across the paper, and when the wind started to blow, the rustling was non-stop. The “moon above the willow branches, the graceful sway of the shadows” of usual had, in this night, turned into “ghosts and demons, teeth bared and claws dancing”.

At first, he still tried to recite the mantra as he sat there, head bobbing--this habit had been looked down upon innumerable times by those two men. Senior Wen had said, If you have to recite this thing to memorise it, stammering and without leaving a single word out, how can you integrate it into your understanding and know it inside and out? His shifu was even more direct, expressing in very simple terms that once he understood it and practiced it, he would naturally know it--in his life, he had never seen anyone memorise a simple mantra more strenuously than they memorised the Four Books and Five Classics. Evidently, Zhang Chengling's stupidity inspired innovation.

Then Zhang Chengling suddenly recalled that both shifu and Senior Wen had gone out, and it was almost as though he was all alone in such an enormous inn. He began to worry, the sense that something was about to happen hanging over him; feeling uneasy, he tugged the bed curtains closed and pulled the blanket over his head, as though he would be safe like this--his way of thinking was incomprehensible.

He waited for a long time, pricking up his ears to listen for movement in his shifu's room next door--of course, he had completely overlooked the fact that given his abilities, he could not have detected it even if Zhou Zishu had returned--like an anxious bunny. He waited for most of the night, but did not hear a single stirring. Eventually, unable to withstand the longing his upper and lower eyelids had for each other, he nodded off drowsily.

Only on the second morning, when he was roused by the noises of the guests in the other rooms rising from bed, did Zhang Chengling scramble from bed and run to his shifu's room. Subsequently, he discovered with disappointment that the blanket and the pillow were cold--the two men really had not returned for the night. The waiter of the inn came upstairs to greet him, and Zhang Chengling could not do anything but head downstairs on his own for breakfast.

He was dejected and unable to lift his spirits. He found himself to be a little useless; at fifteen, sixteen, he was already a grown youth, his trousers growing shorter by the day, but yet his abilities always seemed to be stagnating. Uncle Li had saved his life, then he had met shifu, and then shifu had escorted him to Taihu, he had followed Uncle Zhao to Dongting, and found shifu again...

It was almost as if no matter where he went, no matter what he did, it was never of his own volition, but he was merely following in someone else's tracks obtusely.

Zhang Chengling munched on the bun distractedly. For the first time in his life, he was contemplating this question of how he should make his own way in life.

Right at this moment, the sound of a small commotion came from the doorway. Zhang Chengling held the bun in his mouth, turned his head to look over in that direction, and was stunned along with the rest of the people in the inn.

He saw ten-odd women enter the inn; each and every one of the women was dressed in black, looking like a flock of crows that had flown in together as one. He couldn't tell their ages or see their faces either--because every one of them was wearing a mask that resembled those crudely-made faces of a smiling doll that one would buy at a street stall for children during festivities. However, apart from a smile, bloodstains hung on the corners of the lips of these tragically pale dolls too. With their wide eyes, they looked like little demons.

The person in the lead cast the stunned waiter a sidelong glance, and ordered coldly, "Serve a bowl of vegetarian noodles per head. If you take one more look, I'll dig your eyes out!"

Her voice was rough and hoarse with an indescribable malevolence to it, and sounded like an elderly woman's. One sweep of her gaze, and the people who were sneakily eying them lowered their heads immediately--this bunch of women did not look like the kindly sort, and, with much experience traversing the jianghu, no one wanted to attract trouble.

The black-clothed old lady who led them finally planted herself down domineeringly, gestured, and said, "Keep a close eye on that little bitch. We resume our journey immediately after we finish eating."

The black-clothed women under her command did not waste any time on nonsense. Like they were well-trained, they followed suit and sat. Zhang Chengling only noticed at this moment that there was still an extremely dishevelled and unkempt young woman behind them, who was restrained by them and shoved over to where they were. He focused his eyes on her and was taken aback, thinking, Isn't this Miss Gao, Hero Gao's beloved daughter? How has she been captured by this bunch of people in black?

That disheveled woman was none other than Gao Xiaolian, who had not noticed Zhang Chengling. The corner of her mouth was split, burning with a fiery pain, and she struggled vigorously. A burst of pain across her waist followed immediately after. Half her body went numb. One of the women who was restraining her by the shoulder retracted a long needle which had just been inserted into her waist, and spoke coldly next to her ear, "Which do you think is better: if I turn you into an invalid who won't even be able to stand with a jab of the needle, or make a few cuts across your smooth, delicate face?"

Gao Xiaolian did not dare to struggle any further, terrified and furious, her eyes red-rimmed. That woman stomped ruthlessly on the back of her knee, nearly making her fall flat on her face, and reprimanded, "Then stay still!"

Zhang Chengling hastily lowered his head, pretending as though he had not seen a thing, and avoided the gaze of that woman in black. He only raised his head cautiously after he saw that she had sat down, and scrutinised Gao Xiaolian closely.

His impression of Gao Xiaolian had always been good; he thought of her as a soft-spoken jiejie who was gentle and pretty. Seeing that she even had bruises on her face, obviously from someone's beatings, he privately determined that this bunch of black-clothed women was no good.

He glanced at the entrance again, anxiously wondering, Why are shifu and Senior Wen not back yet?

This gang of black-clothed people were clearly hurrying on their way; unlike Zhang Chengling's thorough chewing and leisurely swallowing, they filled their stomachs hastily, immediately set down money for the meal and made to leave, but there was still no sign of Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing returning any time soon.

Zhang Chengling could not sit and wait any longer.

Come to speak of it, it was odd--as long as Zhang Chengling was in Zhou Zishu's presence, he would seem especially useless. For one, the word 'useless' was often a catchphrase for his shifu, who ranked top in the world for impatience; for another, with shifu to rely on, he was like a child with a mother--for any insignificant, minor troubles, if he wailed "Save me, shifu", there would be his strong and powerful shifu come to rescue him, scolding and cursing as he did so.

Now that Zhou Zishu was absent, he was calm and daring instead. Discreetly calling the waiter over, he gave him some brief instructions, and then chased after the women with great prudence.

On the other side, Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing, who did not return for the night, encountered a strange happenstance too.

As Wen Kexing listened to the voices and creaking of the bed grow increasingly unbridled, he could not help but feel a little puzzled. Usually, in a brothel, these pleasant affairs took place in the private rooms of these maidens who entertained customers. Was this maiden was deaf, blind, or stupid, to be unaware of the empty space underneath the bed boards, and that it housed a large den of Poisonous Scorpions?

He tugged Zhou Zishu's hand to himself and wrote on his palm, Whose room is this?

Zhou Zishu paused, then wrote, The head scorpion's.

Wen Kexing was even more baffled. Privately, he wondered--could the chief Poisonous Scorpion really have let a prostitute entertain customers in his own bedroom? He thought in shock, could this chief Scorpion be this penniless, that the main business of murder and arson was insufficient to maintain a living, and he had to resort to dealing in the business of pleasure too as a side job?

He wrote on Zhou Zishu's palm again. The head scorpion's wife?

Zhou Zishu shook his head, and Wen Kexing was even more baffled. After listening closely for a while, he discovered that there were actually three people in the room--it was just that the battle conditions between this man and woman were truly intense, and almost concealed the noises of the other person. Though that additional person's breathing was extremely light, he could tell that it was slightly rushed. Wen Kexing's shock was growing; he felt that this head Scorpion's hobby was...truly odd.

So he wrote, He can't get it up?

Zhou Zishu paused for a lengthier period of time. After a very long moment, he finally nodded his head gravely.

His side profile reflected the light from the moon that had just risen. His expression was businesslike, as though Lord Zhou was handling the major affairs of the country, and not eavesdropping on private ones. Wen Kexing looked at him and felt that of all the people who assumed a false outward appearance of propriety in this world, if this person claimed second place, no one could claim the first.

Finally, after a long while, the noises inside the room mellowed out gradually. Thinking that they were nearly done, Zhou Zishu patiently waited for them to leave. Yet, a moment later, the bed boards started to creak once more, sounding even livelier this time round--Zhou Zishu's brow furrowed. Were these two ever going to stop? How thick-skinned and shameless they had to be, to be able to give their all so enthusiastically while someone else was appreciating the show they were putting up!

Wen Kexing was nearly tickled by his conflicted expression. Listening to the noises from within the room and the intermittent song coming from the front yard, he looked at the person in front of him, his eyes roaming over Zhou Zishu's waist and legs in particular--those two inside the room were highly spirited, and since there was nothing to do at hand, Wen Kexing wholeheartedly fixed his eyes on a place that was impolite to stare at, and his thoughts turned towards the salacious.

He entertained his salacious thoughts for a while, then lifted a hand and placed it on the side of Zhou Zishu's waist. Zhou Zishu's brow furrowed even more tightly, and he turned his head to the side to sweep a glance over him. Smiling cheekily, Wen Kexing placed his index finger by his own mouth, his demeanour very innocent-looking.

Zhou Zishu thought that Wen Kexing's teasing had made him a little oversensitive to these matters. If Wen Kexing copped a feel, let him; Zhou Zishu was a man anyway, and it was still up for debate who was taking advantage of the other. Magnanimously, he ignored him.

Having taken advantage of him, Wen Kexing continued with his pretence of innocence and slowly slid his palm lower, increasingly satisfied as he found that this figure was pleasantly slender, though slightly too skinny. But there were benefits to a thin frame as well--if his clothes were off, this small waist could be enveloped entirely within Wen Kexing's grip, and it would feel even more enticing.

Unwilling to lose, Zhou Zishu retaliated by pinching his flank, timing it with a squeal from the woman within the room. He even rubbed his two fingers together, huffed a light stream of air from his mouth, slanted his gaze at Wen Kexing, and smirked.

The look in Wen Kexing's eyes darkened immediately. He hauled him into a tight embrace, and kissed him before that smile of Zhou Zishu's could fade. As neither of them dared to make any noise, they could only exercise the limited scope they had, pitting their skills against each other under great constraints. Zhou Zishu had not been able to react in time on the first occasion, and on the second occasion, he had been in agony from his injuries. This was the first occasion where they were on even ground.

Between the two of them, one flocked amongst beauties, acquainted himself with countless highest-ranking courtesans, and took up visiting all the brothels in this world as his duty; the other had escaped from the capital of the ten-mile Moon-Gazing River, and was long accustomed to such social entertainment and playing the role required of him. They were veterans of dalliances; even when it came to the slide of lips and teeth, if it wasn't one force prevailing over the other, it had to be the other force prevailing over him.

After an indeterminate length of time, when the breath of air in his chest nearly stifled him, when even those overly-enthusiastic noises from the two people in the room had quietened, Wen Kexing finally let go of Zhou Zishu, who was similarly trying hard to suppress his unsteady breathing, grasped his hand, and leaned in very close.

All of a sudden, he stopped smiling and looked at Zhou Zishu quietly, as though he had a thousand things to say in that instant, but ultimately resigned all of them to silence. As those in the room ceased their activities, the song coming from the front

yard grew more distinct. A delicate feminine voice was singing softly, "Memories of plum bring me to Xizhou, to him in Jiangbei a branch of it goes..."

On Zhou Zishu's palm, Wen Kexing wrote, stroke by clear stroke, As long as your affection for me is as mine for you, I will not let it be in vain.¹⁶⁸

Zhou Zishu looked at him in silence for a very long time. Gently, his hand curled closed, and gently, he held Wen Kexing's finger in his palm. Yet, it was only a brief touch; in the next instant, their hands parted. He lowered his eyes, avoiding Wen Kexing's gaze once more, and sighed almost imperceptibly.

At this moment, within the room, a man said in a low and satisfied voice, "That's enough, you may leave." Thereafter, there came the sound of the door closing, and Zhou Zishu took the chance to rise into the air, as agile as a sparrow. Landing soundlessly on the roof, he pried a tile loose with light movements to produce a narrow gap, and peered in.

Wen Kexing looked at his own fingers, as though the warmth of that person's palm was still on them. But the night breeze was too cold; with a gentle waft of the wind, it dissipated without a trace. In that moment, he could not put words to what he was feeling, and could only--like he was mocking himself--smile bitterly.

¹⁶⁸ From Song dynasty poet Li Zhiyi's Song of Divination/River Song (卜算子·我住长江头). Translation mine, though it has been translated many times like at here: <https://www.en84.com/dianji/ci/201607/00000282.html>

Chapter 57 - The Gambler

Zhou Zishu thought that his own movements were very light, but the man in the room seemed to have already noticed him a while ago; he raised his head so brazenly, and happened to meet his gaze head on.

Taken aback, Zhou Zishu paused, only to see the man smile at him. It would thus have been impolite of Zhou Zishu to be reticent, so he flipped off the roof, knocked on the window lightly, and announced, “We guests have arrived uninvited. May the master of this house pardon us.”

The window was pushed open from within. Inside the room, a man in white inner robes stood, holding a bowl of tea. His gaze roamed over Zhou Zishu’s face, and swept over Wen Kexing once. He smiled, then asked in a soft voice, “If these two gentlemen had wanted to watch as well, you could knock on the door and enter. Why the stealthiness?”

His voice was almost insubstantial, especially gentle and soft, as though he feared startling something if he spoke loudly. He was of refined and courteous appearance--with monolids, and a nose that was fleshy at the tip but narrow at the wings,¹⁶⁹ he did look very much like a decent person on the surface. Based on his features alone, one really could not tell that he was in fact that Poisonous Scorpion chief who was lacking in eight lifetimes' worth of morals.

Naturally, Zhou Zishu was thick-skinned; upon hearing this, he did not feel the slightest bit uneasy. He said graciously, “Many thanks for your great generosity--but that won’t be necessary. Truth be told, we came here to request a matter of you.”

This head Scorpion cast a glance at them, and mused, “Most of the people who seek me out come for only two things. Either they come to order my children to commit heinous crimes, or they come to ask who has ordered my children to commit heinous crimes. With your skills and capabilities, I am afraid that you are the latter?”

Zhou Zishu spoke candidly, “Indeed.”

The Scorpion set the tea bowl aside. Crossing his arms, he regarded him closely with interest. “What can you give me?”

“Name your price,” Zhou Zishu boasted.

Seeing that he was very magnanimous, his demeanour bold as though he was backed by a fat purse, the Scorpion smiled slightly--usually, people like this were usually too full of themselves, and thought that there was nothing in the whole world--

¹⁶⁹ The Chinese call this a pig gallbladder nose (吊胆鼻).

heaven and earth included--that they could not accomplish, or could not offer. Either that, or...they had already made their decision to renege on this deal.

State a selling price as outrageous as you wish, but I won't be haggling it with a low buying price--I'll simply not pay up at all.

The Scorpion drawled, "Even if I ask you to spend a night in my bed, you'll agree?"

Zhou Zishu regarded his face fastidiously. His gaze surveyed the Scorpion's waist, flank, and thighs next, then he reluctantly agreed, "Sure."

Wen Kexing, who had been listening with relish to one side, immediately protested. "No way! We've shared a bed for so long, and I've never seen you agree this breezily!"

Zhou Zishu flicked him a look and countered, "Do you have the answers to what I'm about to ask?"

Wen Kexing choked.

On the other hand, the Scorpion laughed and licked his lips, his gaze shuttling fiercely between the two of them. Then, he took out a small jar from his robes, shook it twice, and tipped two dice out from it. Holding them in his palm, he said softly, "How about this? Gamble with me. Win a round on me, and I'll tell you a piece of information. Lose a round to me..."

Wen Kexing whispered to Zhou Zishu, "I finally understand why he's so eager to earn quick money. With this addiction, no matter how great his properties and fortunes, they aren't enough for him to ruin. Haven't you heard of, 'The single-minded pursuit of winning money causes a man's two eyes to burn red, turns his three daily meals tasteless, saps his four limbs of energy, he'll abandon his work, neglect his family, be easily infuriated, borrow money from all around...'"¹⁷⁰

Zhou Zishu stepped on his foot.

The Scorpion smirked and said, "There's reason to it, when you put it that way. However, isn't life a grand game with high stakes too? So many people want to kill me; if I die, they win. If I don't die, they'll be uneasy all the time, not knowing which day the collector of souls will come collecting. Don't you think it's too boring if one's whole life proceeds peacefully and smoothly?"

¹⁷⁰ This is a style of writing called 十字令, where ten values/lessons are listed in the form of ten chengyu that contain numbers from one to ten. Wen Kexing goes up to eight here.

Zhou Zishu decisively cut off these two youths' deep discussion about life, and asked, "What happens if we lose a round to you?"

The Scorpion slanted a gaze at him, and said leisurely, "Worry not. I don't want your money, and neither do I want your life. If you lose a round, the two of you will put on a show for me, until I feel refreshed by watching you two go at it--though you two gentlemen should think it over, and take only what you can handle. If you lose too badly, it won't be easy to wrap this up either."

Without a word, Zhou Zishu said resolutely, "I'll see you another time."

At the same moment, Wen Kexing, who could not have asked for anything better, shouted, "I think these stakes are rather good!"

Zhou Zishu pretended that he did not know him, and walked away apathetically. Behind him, the Scorpion said, "Just like that, and you're afraid. You even told me to name any price earlier."

Zhou Zishu did not stop walking, and only said, "I'm already an old man, forget the provocations."

To the side, Wen Kexing smiled apologetically, "That...Scorpion-xiong, please excuse him, my spouse is good in all other aspects, but is shy, and thin-skinned..."

Before he had even finished his sentence, he saw Zhou Zishu turn back around expressionlessly and ask the Scorpion, "Name your terms, what do we gamble on?"

Sometimes, whether methods of provocation were useful or not depended on who the person employing them was.

Just as the Scorpion had raised the small dice jar in his hand, Zhou Zishu scoffed coldly and said, "These are merely trivial games--I'm afraid that even if we do this for a whole night, we will still be unable to decide on a winner."

The Scorpion's brow furrowed. He thought for a moment, then turned around and walked further into the room. Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu jumped in through the window, only to see the Scorpion produce a pouch of small needles as thin as ox hairs. Zhou Zishu's brow furrowed--he had fallen victim to these things before.

The Scorpion pinched a needle between finger and thumb, licked at it lightly with the tip of his tongue, and said, "These have not had the chance to be coated with venom. Why don't we gamble on who can eat more of these?"

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing glanced at each other. In that instant, they shared the same thought, their separate minds as one--Why isn't Ye Baiyi here?

The Scorpion narrowed his eyes, opened his mouth and bit down.

Unbelievably, that needle was like a noodle strand--he chewed it into segments, then swallowed the needle just like that. Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing looked at each other. Neither of them had thought that this head Scorpion would have teeth of iron.

Smiling, the Scorpion asked, “Will the two gentlemen gamble, or undress?”

Wen Kexing looked like he very much wanted to choose the latter. Zhou Zishu abruptly picked up a wine cup from the table, uncorked his own flask, and filled the cup to the brim. Reaching out to pinch two needles, he ground his fingertips together once, and those two thin needles turned into a heap of powder, dissolving into the wine in the blink of an eye. He raised his head and glanced at the Scorpion. Contrary to expectation, the Scorpion was very courteous, gesturing for him to go first. Zhou Zishu finished the wine in his cup with a frown, and flashed the empty bottom of it at him. Observing Zhou Zishu’s countenance as he stood by, Wen Kexing felt that the wine probably did not taste any better than if it had a walnut in it.

The Scorpion smiled as he said, “This brother here, do not blame me for not reminding you--drinking it with wine as you are doing occupies more space in your stomach than eating it dry as I am doing. Can it be that you two gentlemen want to take me, a single person, on together?”

Wen Kexing immediately waved his hands and said, “No, no, no, I don’t have the refined interest or the teeth for this. You two go ahead, go ahead.”

Suddenly, Zhou Zishu smiled, and said, “I’ve eaten two needles, and you’ve eaten one. I think that’s enough to score victory over you.”

Immediately executing an underhanded tactic, he slammed his palm on the table, and those slim needles as thin as ox-hairs scattered through the air, their cold light glinting in all directions. The Scorpion sensed a force hurtling at him, gave a low shout out of reflex, and ducked it. When he looked back again, he saw that all the ox-hair needles on the table had barely missed him as they hurtled past, and were embedded into the wall. Astonishingly, they were stuck inches deep; if he wanted to retrieve them, he could not do so.

Wen Kexing could not help but give a shout of approval, inwardly musing that this move of A-Xu's was indeed incomparably shameless, much like his own way of doing things. Truly, it was like that saying: when someone sang, the other followed.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ 夫唱妻隨 (lit. when the husband sings, the wife follows) - the wife goes along with whatever her husband does, also used to describe a harmonious marriage. Wen Kexing says the equivalent of "when someone sings, someone follows", obfuscating the roles of the husband and wife.

The Scorpion frowned, then his brow slowly relaxed once more. Still placid, he asked, "May I ask this brother for his surname?"

Zhou Zishu said, "My surname is Zhou."

The Scorpion nodded. "Zhou-xiong has good martial ability, and a good mind for tactics, but..."

He uncurled his fingers. A thin needle lay flat on his palm. As he brought it to his mouth, the Scorpion smiled and said, "I'm afraid that it's a draw this time."

Yet, Zhou Zishu uncurled his fingers unhurriedly too, and revealed a needle that he too had secretly hidden in his palm at some point in time. He did not eat it, only brought the needle in front of the Scorpion, and measured it against his--the Scorpion's expression changed abruptly. Only now was he discovering that the needle in his own hand was a segment shorter; at some point in time, it had been shorn into half by the force of this person's palm strike.

Zhou Zishu ground the thin needle in his hand into fine powder, and said, smiling, "Two needles to one and a half, what do you say?"

The Scorpion glared at him acidly. Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu thought he was going to raise trouble, but while this head Scorpion's character was unremarkable, his gambling manners were rather decent. A beat later, he turned his gaze away impassively, and said, "All right. One must be willing to admit defeat if he is willing to bet. What do you want to ask about?"

Zhou Zishu said, "Other than Sun Ding, who paid to have Zhang Chengling killed?"

The Scorpion paused, then looked at them again, and as though he realised something, he said, "Zhang Chengling? Oh, I know who you two gentlemen are now...my men lost track of you in Dongting. I had not thought that you have already found this location, you are omniscient indeed--come with me."

While he spoke, he ripped the bed boards out, and wormed into the opening. Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing followed closely behind.

The two men followed the Scorpion down a secret tunnel--the exterior of this place was all rouge and beauty, but its interior was extraordinarily gloomy and sinister. The Scorpion led them on a journey of twists and turns, down innumerable stairs, before they finally reached the bottom. Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing glanced around, only to find that this place was a dungeon. Repressed growls that sounded human, but also inhuman rang all around them, and the two of them instinctively went on their guard.

The Scorpion retrieved a torch from the wall, stood in front of a cell, and said with the ghost of a smile, "You gentlemen can come over and look at this thing, you should be old acquaintances."

It might have been aggravated by the light; while he spoke, a tragically pale shadow lunged at the Scorpion. It was held back by the cell door, and so fearsomely bared its teeth at them. Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing had a clear look at it; astonishingly, there was a creature locked in there, one exactly the same as that humanlike, yet inhuman creature they had encountered in that mysterious underground cave that year!

They watched the Scorpion gaze at that creature warmly, as though it was a peerless beauty. He said softly, "These are our poisoned men. They used to be human before one year of age, but after they turned one, we continue force feeding them toxins until today. They've grown impenetrable skin and tough bone, and are brimming with killing intent. They're very good children, really...but they're just not very obedient. Perhaps the toxins used have harmed their brains. The toxins will still need to be improved on in the future."

The smile was gone from Wen Kexing's face. Voice low, he asked, "You were the one who set up that underground cave, and the buyer was the Long-Tongued Ghost?"

The Scorpion said, "Indeed."

Wen Kexing cut him off, "Bullshit, I've killed the Long-Tongued Ghost. Who were the people that came after Zhang Chengling's life at Dongting afterwards?"

A sly smile appeared on the Scorpion's face. He said, "I only said that the buyer was the Long-Tongued Ghost. I did not say that there was no one else instructing him to do so from behind the scenes."

Zhou Zishu said, "Ah, this is yet another question. Are you implying that if we wish to obtain this answer, we have to gamble a second time?"

The Scorpion bowed slightly, and said, "Indulge me, Zhou-xiong."

Zhou Zishu flicked his sleeve, annoyed. "Name your terms, what do we gamble on?"

The Scorpion smiled, and said, "My gongfu is not as good as Zhou-xiong's, nor my mind as nimble as Zhou-xiong's when it comes to tactics. If we gamble on those little games, I'm afraid that I will have to lose again. How about we leave it up to fate? We'll head up from here, out to the end of the street. Between the two of you, one will be blindfolded. From the moment this person's hand touches the stone lion at the end of the street, we'll see if the twentieth person to pass before our eyes is a man or a woman. How's this?"

Wen Kexing couldn't help but say, "This gamble is very pointless, I can't see how it benefits you."

The Scorpion said serenely, "It does not matter what we gamble on. For me, what is important is the act of gambling. It can be compared to how others must eat when they are hungry, and drink when they are thirsty; if you don't let me gamble, I won't be able to keep living...what do you say?"

Wen Kexing sighed, feeling that he was running into especially many odd happenstances this year. He pointed at Zhou Zishu and said, "Blindfold him, lest he thinks that I have nefarious intentions."

Zhou Zishu glanced at the Scorpion, and did not object. Wen Kexing felt around in the front of his own robes for a long time, fished out a handkerchief, tied it over Zhou Zishu's eyes, grabbed his arm, and said to the Scorpion, "After you."

The three people made their way back onto ground level like so, and reached the entrance of the pleasure district in this fashion similar to playing hide-and-seek. The Scorpion said, "Zhou-xiong, upon lifting your hand, you will be able to touch that lion. Guests first--please place your bet."

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing said unanimously, "Male."

Though there were courtesans among those thronging here too, there were more pleasure-seeking guests roaming around. Since this Scorpion chief was generous, they accepted this courteous invitation. A vague excitement flashed across the Scorpion's face. His eyes lit up, and he licked his lips as though he couldn't wait. "All right."

From the instant Zhou Zishu lifted his hand, the Scorpion began to count--eighteen, nineteen...

His actions were making even Wen Kexing anxious. Zhou Zishu had already plucked his blindfold off a long while ago, and was watching unblinkingly. The twentieth person passed, in long robes and hair up in a crown--it was a man!

A smile slowly surfaced on Zhou Zishu's face. He was just about to speak, but as this person came closer, his smile froze on his face. On the other hand, the Scorpion swept a smug glance over the two of them, and abruptly stepped forward to stop this passer-by, frightening the passer-by. They heard him say in a gentle voice, "This place is a brothel, and it will be highly inconvenient for this miss to enter. A maiden's virtuous reputation is precious, so please turn back."

That pale and smooth face of that 'man' started to purple. The Scorpion apologised, "Pardon me," and, in a move as quick as lightning, abruptly ripped the

shawl from around 'his' neck. The passer-by gave a short shout of surprise--'his' throat was astonishingly smooth, with not a single bump in sight.

The Scorpion turned around, all smiles. Putting his hands together in his sleeves, he said leisurely to Zhou Zishu, "Zhou-xiong, what do you say about this?"

Chapter 58 - A Harrowing Experience

Zhou Zishu felt very revolted. The world had changed, he thought, and the traditional mores of society had deteriorated--shockingly, in the middle of the night, a maiden would visit a brothel to seek pleasure. He raised his head to look at the night sky, and said, "This..."

The Scorpion humphed, and said, "Those scholars are particular about how 'Every utterance must result in an action, and every action must have a consequence'; the jianghu folks say that 'Retracting a gentleman's given word is as impossible as turning back a fast horse that has been given a lash of the whip'. Even that young delinquent by the roadside knows that the spittle from a promise made is as steadfast as a hammered nail. Can it be that Zhou-xiong wants to go back on his word?"

Stirring the pot, Wen Kexing poked Zhou Zishu's waist, and said, "Exactly. Weaseling your way out of trouble is fine, but going back on your word is too shameless. Even I am almost too ashamed to associate with you."

Zhou Zishu slapped his lecherous paw away, thinking, Have great mercy, and stop associating with me.

He glanced at the Scorpion, and without a second word, turned and walked back in the direction they had come from.

The Scorpion's expression relaxed, and he smiled. In fact, his features were decent, but he was not too pleasant-looking when he smiled--his mouth looked as though it was a little slanted, making him seem especially like he was harbouring no good intentions. On top of that, his frivolous gaze and his lecherous expression made him look positively perverted. Abruptly, Wen Kexing had a foreboding sense of danger; he looked at Zhou Zishu's back, then at this man beside him, and felt that to do that thing in front of this person... required him to do a little mental preparation.

However, he very quickly discovered that he had, in fact, worried unnecessarily.

Arms crossed, the Scorpion stood at the entrance of the room perfumed with burning incense. It seemed like someone had come in to tidy the bed; the bed curtains, half-put up, drooped loosely. The Scorpion asked, "Do you two gentlemen need to bathe and change, or require any items to...spice things up?"

Zhou Zishu rolled up his sleeves, and said very much like a man without a partner, "Such trouble is unnecessary. Bring me brush and ink."

The Scorpion paused, taken aback. A beat later, he clapped his hands lightly. A person in servant's attire ran over in small steps and stood still in front of him, waist

bent and head lowered. The Scorpion gave him instructions in a low voice. Zhou Zishu hurried to add, "And a cut¹⁷² of xuan paper."

The servant went away. The Scorpion looked at him, and asked suspiciously, "Zhou-xiong isn't thinking of playing another trick, is he?"

Zhou Zishu brazenly sat by the bed with his legs crossed and said, smiling, "Aren't you sick of watching a few lumps of flesh roll around all day long? Wait for a brief while longer, and I'll let you see something novel."

To the side, Wen Kexing remained silent, going along with whatever was happening. He was contemplating--it was also good if A-Xu had the capability to shirk this, so that they did not have to let this Scorpion take advantage, but if he truly wanted to...ai, one had to follow the man they married, be he a rooster or a dog. Naturally, he would have to do his fair share of reluctant undertaking, and lay down his life for a gentleman this one time.

A short moment later, brush, ink, paper, and inkstone were all present. Zhou Zishu stood, extended a hand to gesture politely at the Scorpion, and said, "Please wait for a little longer."

Naturally, the Scorpion was not impatient. He closed the door behind him, picked up the teapot, and started to pour tea for himself--he watched as Zhou Zishu laid down the brushstrokes with almost no hesitation. Looking at his demeanour, Zhou Zishu gave off the air of a master artist. Brush flying, in a scant few strokes, a picture was completed. He set it aside to dry, and then stretched his demonic claw out at the next sheet of paper.

At first, Wen Kexing did not know what he was planning to do, and stood beside him curiously, craning his neck to look. As he watched, his expression grew odder by the moment, and his eyebrows rose even higher by the moment, until they almost lifted off from his face. It was like he had just met Zhou Zishu for the first time; words failing him, he was truly speechless in awe, and could only stand aside with a solemn expression.

After about thirty minutes, Zhou Zishu had burned through a dozen sheets of paper, and accomplished his grand task. He threw the brush aside, picked up the last sheet, and blew on it gently to dry it. Then, he picked up the first sheet with his fingertips, and slapped it onto the wall with the force of his palm. The soft and fine xuan paper sank into the wall. His hand did not falter; in an instant, he had arranged the dozen sheets of paper in a row according to sequence, and slapped them all onto the wall.

¹⁷² About 100 sheets

The Scorpion's face was already green--on the dozen sheets of xuan paper, the lines extremely simple, were none other than...erotic pictures.

They were very simple erotic pictures. There were only two small figures--a circle represented the head, and sparse brushstrokes extended from it sketched out the body and four...ahem, five limbs. Even though it was a simple drawing, the movements of the figures were extraordinarily life-like. From how they stripped, all the way to the end, the entire process was illustrated without a single missing detail, drawing the onlooker's eye to each subsequent picture. It even gave the onlooker the impression that the figures in the picture had started to move.

Wen Kexing held back his urge to remark for very long, before he finally tried his best to hit the nail on the head with his evaluation. "A-Xu, I couldn't tell that you even possess this sort of skill."

Zhou Zishu quickly replied with polite airs, "It's a mediocre skill unworthy of this praise, really unworthy."

Wen Kexing discovered that Zhou Zishu's skin was growing thicker by the day, and did not know how to respond. The Scorpion set the tea bowl in his hand down onto the table with great force, rose to his feet abruptly, and laughed in anger, saying, "Is Zhou-xiong playing a trick on me?"

Zhou Zishu put his hands together in his sleeves and said unhurriedly, "How can you say that? I asked who was after Zhang Chengling's life, but you only told us who the customer was, and didn't reveal who was behind the scene directing him to do so. Isn't this taking advantage of loopholes too? Since it is so, you only said that the two of us put up a show for you... "

He reached out and rapped his knuckles on the pictures on the wall. "The two of us have put on a show for you--if there are any dissimilarities to the real thing anywhere, please offer me some pointers."

Like his only fear was that the Scorpion could not make sense of the drawings, Wen Kexing enthusiastically explained, "I'm really sorry, my spouse's artistic skill isn't too good. Come, come, if you can't make sense of it, I can explain it to you. That small figure on top is me..."

Zhou Zishu cast him a sidelong glance, and interrupted him coolly, "To explain is to have some secret to hide. Why do that to yourself?"

The Scorpion clenched his fist tightly, and forced out a few words from between clenched teeth. "Too outrageous, you are!"

Instantly, without any discernible gesture from him, eight Scorpions in black materialised out of thin air around them. Yet, Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu did not

seem to be surprised; Wen Kexing even laughed, "To have this dalliance of a humble one like me surrounded and observed by all of you present, I am truly ashamed."

The Poisonous Scorpions did not intend to waste any time on nonsense, and without warning, lunged at the two of them as a well-trained group. Zhou Zishu lifted his hand and slammed it down, flipping the small table before him, and took the chance to retreat swiftly. By this moment, it was already close to midnight; a dull ache was starting to form in his chest. He did not try to endure it, making a wise decision not to chance the odds, and told Wen Kexing, "I'm leaving this to you."

Then he executed a feint to dodge a Poisonous Scorpion, leapt out of the window, and fled.

Wen Kexing grimaced; for the first time in his life, he was cleaning up someone else's messes. Upon seeing that Zhou Zishu had disappeared out of sight, he instantly stopped being merciful. He struck out, and a Scorpion in front of him was drained of all life and blood by his single palm strike--in a split second, the portion of bared skin on the Scorpion's face swiftly greyed and withered, his eyes bulging out of his sockets, and looked as though he had become a desiccated corpse.

The man was dead.

Wen Kexing looked at his own palm, and sighed gently. "We were only playing a small trick, Scorpion-xiong, why be moved to anger?"

The head Scorpion calmed down, and raised his hand to halt his Poisonous Scorpions. Eyeing Wen Kexing guardedly, he asked, "Who are you?"

Wen Kexing flicked his eyes up to look at him, and said, "If you still do not know who I am at this point, aren't the Poisonous Scorpions too useless?"

The Scorpion seemed to have realised something, and the corner of his eye started to twitch. Wen Kexing lowered his voice even more, as if he did not intend for anyone else to overhear, and said, smiling, "We are both of unorthodox and demonic paths. Why cause trouble for each other?"

He turned around to leave immediately once he was done speaking. Although this man was all smiles, his expression devoid of any visible evil intent, inexplicably, in that instant, he radiated a potent bloodthirstiness that was difficult to overlook. Astonishingly, the swarm of Poisonous Scorpions was forced back by his aura--not a single one of them dared to step forward and detain him.

The Scorpion suddenly called out to him, saying, "Don't you want to know who paid for those suicide warriors..."

Wen Kexing looked back at him, and said, “Many thanks, I’ve mostly figured it out.”

He leapt out of the window too, and chased after Zhou Zishu. In a blink of the eye, there was no trace of him, but the words that he murmured stayed where he had been: “If I’m stupid enough to be unable to figure it out until now, won’t I have been already flayed alive by those minor ghosts predatorily eying my position?”

Fengya Mountain, the bamboo grove, housing swarms of malicious Ghosts.

Zhou Zishu was not travelling quickly. Along the way, he was mulling over those poisoned men he saw in the Scorpion’s basement, and the rumoured Long-Tongued Ghost--evidently, the Long-Tongued Ghost had recognised Wen Kexing, but had still wanted to kill him. As expected, there was much more to this than met the eye. That Long-Tongued Ghost did not seem to be too capable; who was the person behind his actions?

Was it that Sun Ding in red purposely misdirecting them, or was it that six-fingered Hanged Ghost Xue Fang he spoke of behind this?

Right at this moment, he suddenly heard rushed footsteps coming in his direction. By now, it was very late at night, late enough that the night watchman had already gone around the streets with his gong.¹⁷³ Reflexively, Zhou Zishu ducked into a side alley, engaging his martial abilities with some effort to suppress the Three Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupunctures so that they would not act up too fiercely, and listened closely.

That person sounded like they were getting closer and closer. Though their steps were in disarray, he could tell that they were someone who knew qinggong. Yet, for some unknown reason, their breathing was extremely rough, as though... they were injured?

Before Zhou Zishu could see who it was, he heard a person draw near behind him. His back stiffened. Fingers bent into claws, he whipped around and went for the person’s throat, but was stopped halfway--Wen Kexing patted his chest, looking at him with a wronged expression, and mouthed “Murdering your dear husband!”. Zhou Zishu only rescinded his hand then, and continued looking in the direction the sound had come from.

Surprisingly, the person who ran in their direction was someone familiar. It was that Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao, who had once come to look for him about the Lapis Armour. This time, she did not disguise her features, exposing her true, horrifying

¹⁷³ 打更: Time at night was divided into 5 gongs, each lasting about 2 hours. A night watchman would walk the streets, banging a gong and announcing what time it was.

appearance. Her demeanour was even more dishevelled--her hair was loose and straggly, and there were bloodstains on the corner of her mouth. Zhou Zishu frowned slightly.

He did not expect the arm reaching out from behind to detain him by looping around his waist. A hand was laid on his chest, and he heard Wen Kexing whisper next to his ear, "Don't suppress it, lest it hurts even more when it acts up tomorrow. We'll just wait here for a while."

Frowning, Zhou Zishu said, "Then..."

Wen Kexing shushed him, and hugged him gently. An extraordinarily thin thread of energy flowed from his palm, combing through Zhou Zishu's meridians. However, he did not dare to use the slightest bit of strength, for fear that using a greater force would rattle his nails. Zhou Zishu paused, but did not reject it, and merely closed his eyes to rest. Regardless of who ran past them, they would have to wait until he lasted through the pain tonight.

While the two of them did not return for the night, Zhang Chengling made the decision to chase after that black swarm of women. He did not dare to go too close for fear that he would be discovered, yet he was also afraid that someone would recognise him. Thus, he picked up a block of mud by the roadside to smear his face dirty, and mussed up his hair with his hands, disguising himself as a child beggar.

He tracked them for a whole day. This group of women were like sadhu--they travelled very quickly on foot and did not rest, only stopping at a small inn when the sky darkened once again. Zhang Chengling observed them from afar, and felt that Gao Xiaolian was suffering beyond description. Harshly dragged along the journey like this, he thought, she would be barely hanging onto life if they continued on their journey for a few days more.

Coming out here of his own accord was a decision he had made after mustering up his courage; after mustering up his courage once, he couldn't resist doing it a second time. In his mind, he started to formulate a plan to rescue this Miss Gao during the night.

He watched those women in black enter the inn, smeared another handful of mud on his hands and followed them in, pretending to beg. After wandering around once, obtaining a few copper coins from his begging, he memorised which room Gao Xiaolian had been shoved into. Then he squatted outside the inn like a real beggar child, with his head lowered as he sat on the steps, hugging his knees. No one paid any attention to him; even though it was a prosperous era, there were still child beggars of this sort everywhere. He waited till it was late at night before he finally sat upright, limbered up his numb arms and legs, and prepared to infiltrate the inn.

He muttered the mantra for the Nine Palaces Steps, as though reciting it would make him a little more skilled, and silently wove his way through the guest rooms.

Out of the blue, a black shadow dropped from above him, catching him off guard-- it was one of those black-clothed women! She, too, did not make a sound; upon facing him, she immediately started to strike at him.

Although Zhang Chengling did not have much confidence in himself, he had undergone half a year's training under the two great experts Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu. With his additional diligence, he was long incomparable to how he had been before. Instead of going toe to toe against her, he glided outwards past her like a fish, and then met each of her blows.

Yet, a brief moment later, that woman seemed to have noticed something, and made a light questioning sound. Immediately after, she executed a feint, then disappeared from before Zhang Chengling's eyes. Although Zhang Chengling's gongfu had improved, he was ultimately inexperienced; frightened, he searched his surroundings for her. That woman in black abruptly emerged behind him. Zhang Chengling felt the acupoint on his neck close to the shoulder go numb. A hand clamped over his mouth, and he was abducted by this woman.

Chapter 59 - Crossing Paths Again

There was only one sentence in Zhang Chengling's mind--I'm doomed!

In the past, when he was with Zhou Zishu, anything that could happen--good, bad, or whatever shape the situation could go--would have been predicted by Zhou Zishu, who was born to expend thought and effort. Zhang Chengling, a dumb child, naturally could not keep up with the reasonings of those two, and was happy to slack off. From day to night, he thought of nothing at all, his mind empty; here, without anyone to rely on, his brain became unusually agile.

Why did that bunch of women still want to bring Gao Xiaolian along with them, he reasoned, even though they hated her that much? Were they not hesitant that she would delay their journey, and that they even had to manage her need for sustenance? Obviously, she was useful to them. Otherwise, she would have died a long time ago--what the jianghu lacked the least was savage individuals who found a single glare sufficient reason to kill someone over. If so...now that he had been captured, did they intend to interrogate him thoroughly?

Zhang Chengling made up his mind. Even if they interrogated him, he could not reveal his true identity. Otherwise, there would be huge trouble, because there were even more matters of discord about him--but what if Gao Xiaolian recognised him?

Nonsensical thoughts roared chaotically in his brain as he was dragged out of the inn like a gunny sack by that woman in black. She brought him to an unassuming corner next to the stables, but set him down all of a sudden. Hovering between surprise and suspicion, Zhang Chengling eyed her, but the woman shifted her hand and unblocked his acupoints. She yanked down the mask on her face, and asked, "Are you Zhang Chengling, that little useless thing?"

Zhang Chengling's eyes widened, then, nearly crying out of joy, almost threw himself at her. He fought off his trembling voice, calling out, "Gu Xiang-jiejie!"

He opened his arms as though he wanted to hug her, but Gu Xiang fended him off with a hand and shoved him aside. She said solemnly, "Men and women, fat or thin, must not be improperly intimate with each other.¹⁷⁴ I have a spouse now, don't get touchy-feely with me."

Blinking, Zhang Chengling looked dumbly at her for a long while, before he said in sudden realisation, "Oh? Have you married Cao-dage? I understand now, are you and him...sharing a blanket?"

¹⁷⁴ The original idiom is “男女授受(shou shou)不亲” [It is improper for a man and a woman to exchange gifts and be intimate]. Gu Xiang mistakes the “shou” for 瘦 (skinny), and changes it to 胖瘦 (pang shou).

Gu Xiang's face turned red in an instant. Glaring ferociously at Zhang Chengling, she questioned, "What nonsense are you talking about? Which bastard taught you these obscene things?"

The difference between a young maiden and an old woman was that, as bold as the young maiden was, she was only bold when speaking of others' affairs; once it came to her own, she was always thin-skinned. Zhang Chengling actually had a very innocent mind--be it at the Zhang Manor, or roaming about in exile, no one had properly explained to him what those things were all about.

He could only infer some traces of it from his two flippant shifus' mutual teasing, merge it with his own imagination, and draw the conclusion that "Those who share a blanket are husband and wife". And thus, in the teenager's pure heart, the blanket had become a mystical ceremonial ritual, one like exchanging wine cups.¹⁷⁵

He didn't think there was anything impure about it, so he asked it casually. Gu Xiang's hackles rose, and she raised her hand to discipline this little ruffian who spoke impertinently. Hastily, Zhang Chengling evaded it, uttering the mantra as he did so. This had almost become his trademark--if he didn't recite the mantra, he could not perform the qinggong.

Gu Xiang made another questioning noise; earlier, when they had exchanged blows, she had sensed that this little tyke knew some gongfu. If some moves hadn't looked more familiar to her, in the dim conditions, she would have almost not recognised him. She looked Zhang Chengling up and down, and said, "I haven't seen you for some days, but you've become a little more competent. Where is my master and your shifu?"

And so Zhang Chengling related the whole process of how he had been heartlessly abandoned by that scumbag couple. After listening to it, Gu Xiang spat, reached out a hand to slap him upside the head, and reprimanded, "So you've grown old enough to leave the nest? Do you know who those people are? Not even I and...and Cao-dage dare to act rashly, what are you playing hero for?"

As she spoke, another person jumped down from the top of the wall, dressed in black clothes and a mask, in a woman's long skirt, and said, "A-Xiang, why are you taking so long? I thought you..."

Astonishingly, it was a man's voice. He noticed Zhang Chengling, abruptly stopped talking, and plucked off his mask. It was none other than Cao Weining.

Cao Weining stared at them with wide eyes for a long moment, before he pointed to Zhang Chengling and said, "Ah...you are, that little fellow Zhang Chengling. Why

¹⁷⁵ 交杯酒 - A traditional wedding ritual where the bride and groom will drink from separate cups, and then exchange their cups to drink from.

have you painted your face like a theatre actor?¹⁷⁶ Where is your shifu and his company?”

Reliably, Zhang Chengling was about to retell his account of what happened, but Gu Xiang interrupted them hastily, “Don’t waste time talking about the old days now. Hurry and get that maiden Gao out, then we’ll talk.”

She fished out a sheet of paper from the front of her robes. On it, lines and a few talismanic scribbles, missing strokes here and there and understood by no one, were crookedly drawn. Gu Xiang said, “I have sketched out the rooms in this inn. There’s a place circled here, it’s where Gao Xiaolian is locked up--hells, at first, I thought that they were taking turns with her surveillance, but who knew that these women are so wary that they don’t even trust their own people? Only a few close confidantes of that old woman are allowed to go near Gao Xiaolian.”

Cao Weining came close, tapping his chin as he asked, “What should we do?”

Eager to test out his plan, as though he had grown addicted to taking risks, Zhang Chengling volunteered a terrible idea, “Why don’t we go and cause some disturbance, I’ll distract them and lead them away while you two go and rescue her. Then we’ll meet up afterwards.”

Cao Weining said, “Good idea!”

Gu Xiang said coolly, “If one out of the three of us is as skilled as your shifu or my master, we don’t have to think of a plan. We can charge in to fight them and grab her right away--kid, you’ve only spent a few days learning qinggong, and you want to ‘lure someone out’?”

Cao Weining immediately changed his mind and supported the opposition. “Yes, what A-Xiang says is sensible.”

Zhang Chengling looked at him silently, and felt that even if Gu Xiang had said, “Cao Weining is a scoundrel and a bastard”, he would also nod his head, bow, and reply without any consideration for his principles, “What A-Xiang says is sensible.”

Gu Xiang analysed strategically, “Those old women are not ordinary people. That one leading them, people call her ‘Black Poison Hag’. Rumour has it that she came from Nanjiang, and practices gu poison, constructs miasmas and the like...”

Upon hearing the word “Nanjiang”, Zhang Chengling couldn’t help but interject, “How can that be, the Great Shaman is a good person...”

¹⁷⁶ Cao Weining calls him 小花脸, which is a minor comedic role with specific face makeup (丑) in Chinese opera. Yes, he technically called him a ‘little clown’.

Gu Xiang rolled her eyes at him. “What about the Great Shaman? He rules over the great Shiwan mountains of Nanjiang. Can he care about even the insignificant worms and grasses that live within them? Also, I already said that it was only a rumour...”

Cao Weining immediately said, “That’s right, that’s right. We who live in the Central Plains have always avoided discussing Nanjiang, we’re actually not very clear about what goes on there.”

Zhang Chengling could only give Cao Weining a wordless look.

Gu Xiang continued, “I can’t say for sure how skilled this old woman is either...but anyway, I can’t defeat her. As for Cao-dage, if it’s normal combat, he might have a few ounces of confidence, but after tracking them for this journey and observing them from afar, I feel that the Black Poison Hag must have other tricks. This is even more difficult, also, they have many people.”

Cao Weining suggested, “How about...we scatter some sleeping powder?¹⁷⁷”

Gu Xiang said, “Do you think that the Black Poison Hag will fall into your trap, or fall into mine? Those from the Central Plains are no match for those from Nanjiang at this sort of thing in the first place, you...”

She looked like she was about to cuss him out, but she took one look at Cao Weining, and swallowed her words back down. He was, after all, her man. She couldn’t bear to.

Cao Weining hurriedly changed his tune. “That’s sensible, it is indeed so. I’m really too dumb, we’ll listen to whatever you say.”

The three cobblers¹⁷⁸ decided that Gu Xiang was their only commander, and she started directing them like one.

After enduring the pain forty-five minutes after midnight, Zhou Zishu found that the agony from the Three-Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupunctures was no longer as fierce. It was only then that he discovered that the positions the two men were in were amiss, coughed, and fought his way out of Wen Kexing’s arms. Wen Kexing looked at him placidly, asking with the insinuation of a smile, “A-Xu, your erotic pictures are so extraordinarily life-like. Completing them with just a few strokes of the brush like so-- in truth, you were unleashing a bit of your long-repressed desires, weren’t you?”

¹⁷⁷ A powder made out of jimsonweed/devil’s snare.

¹⁷⁸ Comes from an idiom “Three cobblers putting their brains together rivals Zhuge Liang’s brilliance”. (Further reading: <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2016/09/a-match-of-wits/>)

With the same insinuation of a smile, Zhou Zishu replied politely, “You give me too much merit, too much merit. Those were merely casual scribbles.”

Wen Kexing said, “Oh? Even a casual scribble of yours can capture the very essence of its subjects so divinely?”

Zhou Zishu turned his head away, and exited the small alley. Bending to examine the bloodstains on the ground closely, he changed the topic. “Looks like she ran in that direction. Although, why is Liu Qianqiao here?”

Wen Kexing followed behind him like a shadow. Upon hearing this, he sighed, “A-Xu, why do you have to be so courteous with me? If you have such thoughts in mind, we can talk about it openly and have an honest chat about it, and discuss the issue of the roles too.”

Zhou Zishu said coolly, “There is no need to discuss this matter.”

Wen Kexing smiled lecherously. “That’s even better.”

Zhou Zishu interrupted his beautiful fantasy. “You can stop dreaming.”

He immediately gave chase in the direction of the bloodstains. Wen Kexing followed behind him, obviously not paying attention--at present, his mind was currently too preoccupied with sex to care about whether Liu Qianqiao was alive or dead.

Following the blood trail, the two men gave chase. All of a sudden, Zhou Zishu asked, “The Long-Tongued Ghost wants to kill you, and so do the people behind him...why?”

Wen Kexing, who was still chattering non-stop earlier, suddenly fell quiet and was silent. Just as Zhou Zishu thought that he would not answer his question, he heard Wen Kexing say, “Why do you think I am the Master of the Ghost Valley?”

Zhou Zishu cast a glance at him, and said offhandedly, “Because you’re infinitely capable.”

Wen Kexing smiled slightly. This smile of his was a little forced, and astonishingly, had something demented vaguely lurking in it. He said, “I am the Valley Master because they can’t do anything about it. Whoever enters the Ghost Valley will have their debts from the world outside cleared entirely. If it is a paradise apart from the world, won’t its borders burst from the masses swarming in?”

This reason was one that Zhou Zishu could deduce even if he reasoned with his toes, but in that moment, he still remained silent...almost as though he only wanted to hear it coming from this person's mouth.

Wen Kexing continued, "At the foot of Fengya Mountain, there is no morality and justice. Either devour others, or be devoured. No one can do anything about me--I can kill anyone who I wish to kill, and that is why I am the Master of the Ghost Valley. At the moment, they are unable to kill me, and can only do as I command. However, this does not mean that they don't want to kill me. If there's a chance to do so, they will still make trouble...for example, some people think that once they obtain Rong Xuan's secret manual from back then, they can slay me, this supreme demon, with their own hands."

Looking at him, Zhou Zishu asked, "The Ghosts are willing to risk the chance of the sun 'corroding' them as they exit the Valley against the rules and fan the flames to get rid of you?"

Wen Kexing laughed soundlessly. "That's because the Ghosts are not very patient. Of the preceding Valley Masters, none of them have survived three years on that seat. This is already my eighth year, and I still refuse to read the situation and kick the bucket. Won't you say that they are very anxious?"

Zhou Zishu was silent for a long while. Then he said, "If I had longer to live, I could think of a solution so that you never have to return to that place. I'd keep you as a young, pretty face in my house."

Wen Kexing paused, and turned his head to look at him, as if to ascertain that he was not joking. After a long while, he finally said, "You said...you want to keep me?"

Zhou Zishu laughed, and said, "It doesn't matter what seat you are on. If one has been trapped by a particular post, it is discomfiting. This feeling..."

He stopped, the rest of his words vanishing into a very slight smile--no one understood this feeling more than he did.

The break of dawn was nearing. Not long after, Liu Qianqiao's trail went cold; the two men searched the spot for a while to no avail. Just as they were preparing to turn back, a woman's tragic shout suddenly rang out. Zhou Zishu frowned, and headed in that direction in a show of physical skill.

The two men concealed the sounds of their breathing, and walked with lighter footsteps. As they watched, hidden off to the side, they saw Liu Qianqiao, an arrow embedded in her shoulder, still fighting another person with her all. Surprisingly, that person was also someone familiar to them--it was Cangshan Sect's Huang Daoren.

Chapter 60 - Husband and Wife

Zhou Zishu could not figure out why these two people would come all the way here-- they had even run into each other and were fighting. On the other hand, Wen Kexing stood aside and watched placidly amidst the tumult.

Liu Qianqiao was already wounded, and Huang Daoren was gradually closing in on her. Seeing that she was floundering, forced to keep retreating, he sprung into the air and swung his hengdao down with a bellow. Traces of brutishness flashed across that face of his--his expression was harsh and ferocious, with no trace of the valiant poise he had possessed when Zhou Zishu had sent him flying with a kick.

He was truly an opportunist who acted weak in the face of those stronger than he, and affected strength in the presence of those weaker than he!

Liu Qianqiao scrambled to raise her short sword above her head in a parry. Her sword was actually a few inches longer than Gu Xiang's dagger, but every one inch fewer of sword was, after all, accompanied by one ounce more of danger, and she did not have as many tricks as Gu Xiang did. This risky parry allowed Huang Daoren's blade to graze her fingertips, letting her feel his cold and sinister killing intent. The short sword shattered at the hilt; Liu Qianqiao hit the ground in an ungainly crash, and rolled away.

Among the two, one chased tirelessly, and the other ran for her life madly, like a scene out of a toxic relationship. As he watched Huang Daoren chase the maiden into the distance like a savage creature, Wen Kexing prodded Zhou Zishu and hinted, "That chick's in danger. Are you not going to rescue her?"

Zhou Zishu felt that this person really had nothing better to do, and replied politely without even looking at him, "This husband is afraid that you will be jealous."

Wen Kexing was silent for a long while, before he said with a solemn expression, "A-Xu, be a little more serious. Stop taking advantage of me all the time."

Zhou Zishu could not help himself from turning his head to glance at him as he thought with surprise, This Wen person knows of the word 'serious'? Then he saw Wen Kexing frowning his brow slightly, his attitude one of great propriety, and saying in complete seriousness, "I hold grudges very easily. Keep teasing me, and if I can't hold myself back when we undergo the Rite of Duke of Zhou¹⁷⁹ in the future because I still recall all of these instances, you're the one who has to suffer."

Zhou Zishu was silent for a long while. "You have worried unnecessarily."

¹⁷⁹ In the first few years of the Western Zhou dynasty, everyone was slutting it out all the time. The Duke of Zhou said "This shit's not going to fly", and banned pre-marital sex.

Then, without a second backward glance, he gave chase in the direction of the Green Vixen Liu Qianqiao's tracks. In this handful of months that they had spent stowed away in Shuzhong, something else must have happened in the jianghu, he thought. Hints of the tense atmosphere that heralded a coming storm had already surfaced when they were in Dongting, but they had coincidentally left for the Puppet Manor at that point in time.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zhou Zishu scanned Wen Kexing, who was following carefreely behind him, and thought, As the Master of the Ghost Valley, he cannot have possibly not perceived the state of affairs back then--and he left with Ye Baiyi, leaving his subordinates to muck around? Is he not afraid that someone actually obtains the Lapis Armour and the key, and acquires Rong Xuan's martial techniques, which will be disadvantageous to him?"

Based on Zhou Zishu's observations, there was some unmentionable affair between Liu Qianqiao and that beautiful middle-aged man who dearly loved to use a fan, Yu Qiufeng. Was Huang Daoren not Yu Qiufeng's lackey? Why let him loose to hunt and kill Liu Qianqiao? What benefit would Liu Qianqiao's death bring him...or had internal strife occurred among Yu Qiufeng and Huang Daoren's crew?

Zhou Zishu's gaze flashed as he recalled the two pieces of Lapis Armour lost to burglary at the Gao Family Manor--when Shen Zhen had died, it would not have been easy for the Ghosts to infiltrate Dongting discreetly, surrounded by numerous experts as it had been. It was highly likely that a mole on the inside had stolen the Lapis Armour in the name of the Ghost Valley. In connection, he recalled Yu Tianjie, Yu Qiufeng's only son who had died outside of the Zhao Family Manor; there had been a piece of Lapis Armour on the Long-Tongued Ghost, who had killed Yu Tianjie...

Did even thievery warrant a hereditary legacy from father to son? Zhou Zishu mused.

Ruminating on this matter, his thoughts wandered further and further away, until a sudden tragic shout pulled his thoughts back to the present. Zhou Zishu raised his head in time to see Huang Daoren sever one of Liu Qianqiao's arms. Blood spurted into the distance; she stumbled four, five steps backwards, before she could not hold out any longer and fell to the ground with a 'thud'.

Merrily, Huang Daoren hefted his sabre and closed in on her with slow steps as he said, "Why, still refusing to hand it over?"

It? What 'it'? Zhou Zishu frowned, wondering if Liu Qianqiao and Yu Qiufeng's little secret affair had been discovered. Could Huang Daoren have thought that the Lapis Armour which the adulterer stole was in the adultress' hands?

Concealed in the shadows, he observed Huang Daoren. This man's head grew in the shape of a potato, and must be functioning like one, he opined--even if Yu

Qiufeng really could not have kept anything hidden any longer and had been exposed, why would he hand such an important thing over to this woman?

If the premises that he had deduced were true, it was clear that once Yu Qiufeng, that slimy man, had sensed that the situation was going awry, he had pushed this silly wench out as a scapegoat. Yet, this Liu Qianqiao just had to be so deeply sentimental still, and remained tight-lipped.

At this moment, Wen Kexing poked him again, and Zhou Zishu's train of thought was interrupted again. Shooting him an annoyed glance, Zhou Zishu asked in an almost imperceptible murmur, "What is it this time?"

Smilingly, Wen Kexing pointed to the scene of violence and gore that was playing out not too far away from them, and said in a low voice, "If you want to know so badly, why not rescue her, and ask her properly?"

Zhou Zishu sensed that he was not harbouring any good intentions, and reflexively asked, "Why don't you rescue her?"

Wen Kexing said, "I can't rescue her. Such an elegant, charismatic, charming man like me can never interfere to rescue a woman. Otherwise, if she falls for me in the future, and I don't like women, won't I have to let her down? This sort of business gives bad karma, it's something that one should never..."

This person did not discern between scenarios that were appropriate to be batty in, Zhou Zishu thought. Finding his manner unpleasant to the eye, he lifted a button off his collar, and loaded it in his palm. Yet, just as he was about to flick it out, and before he could make any movement, Zhou Zishu's gaze coalesced abruptly. He darted to the side, yanking Wen Kexing along with him--someone was coming!

The two of them had just gotten out of the way when they heard a cold humph come from the woods. Zhou Zishu's ear twitched unconsciously. Finding it interesting, Wen Kexing could not help himself from reaching out to play with it. Zhou Zishu caught his wrist, and gave him a warning glance along with it.

Thereafter, two figures that could be recognised even in pitch blackness appeared--they were none other than those two old folks, Peach Red and Willow Green. The one who had humphed was Peach Red Grandma. Glaring at Huang Daoren with a spiteful expression, she raged, "Huang, are you planning to claim it for yourself?"

He did not know if it was because he had hung around Wen Kexing for too long, but these words planted a not-too-decent thought in Zhou Zishu's mind. Subconsciously, he cast a sideway glance at Wen Kexing, only to see him regard these four people with a strange expression. As though he was sighing with feeling, Wen Kexing moved his lips slightly, sending his words straight into Zhou Zishu's ear: "Such clandestine dalliances among a great number of participants with unusual

predilections really makes one ashamed that his own knowledge of what the world has to offer is lacking...”

Zhou Zishu pinched his wrist, and Wen Kexing shut his mouth obediently. As they listened attentively to the conversation happening over on the other side, they saw Huang Daoren grin falsely at these two old folks, then, abruptly raise his voice and said loudly, “How would I dare to trouble you two? A bitch like this, I can easily capture on my own.”

Willow Green Grandpa looked coldly at him, and said, “Do not play tricks on us.”

Huang Daoren did not speak. He retreated half a step to the side, as though to avoid the insinuation, but the sabre in his hand did not return to its sheath. Instead, it hung from his hand guardedly, as if demonstrating what was meant by ‘affable in appearances, but hostile at heart’.

Peach Red Grandma eyed him guardedly, regarded Liu Qianqiao like a venomous snake, and said, “Young lass, you best answer whatever Granny asks you. It’ll save Granny effort, and save you from physical torment.”

The chill of early spring was still biting, but Liu Qianqiao was soaked all over in cold sweat as though she had been hauled from the water. She had not managed to stop the bleeding of her severed arm in time; her face was extremely pale, and she was quaking from pain all over like a leaf in strong wind. Still, she looked at these three people stubbornly, gritting her teeth to try and stop the quiver to her voice as she said, “If...if you want to kill me, kill me. Why are you talking so much nonsense?!”

If a person like Liu Qianqiao had uttered this, it was most likely that she did not know anything--to her, how could a mere possession be more important than her life?

Yet, those three crude knaves could not grasp this. Peach Red Grandma chuckled coldly. “You’re turning down a polite offer for punishment!” Her hand shot out, and a split second later, Liu Qianqiao emitted a short scream--Peach Red Grandma had severed her other arm too.

Without any support, Liu Qianqiao collapsed onto the ground, her whole body spasming. She jerked upwards repeatedly, panting heavily with her mouth wide open like a dying fish, writhing on the ground as though she was trying to flip herself over to sit up.

Liu Qianqiao's eyes were unfocused, but still she murmured, "If you want to kill me...then kill me..."

Huang Daoren smiled, and drawled, “Peach Red-dajie, if she dies just like this, that’ll ruin things. She has taken a blow from me, and is already at the end of her life.

Leave a little mercy when you lay your knife on her...anyway, are there not plenty of ways to make a woman talk?"

He was lecherous in appearance, and looked even moreso once he smiled. Wen Kexing sighed, suddenly morose at all the changes that time eventually brought to the world. "The younger generations outshine the previous ones. I feel that he resembles a supreme demon of the jianghu even more than I do."

Zhou Zishu finally launched the button in his hand. He did not hold back; the button struck the wrist of the hand which Huang Daoren was using to hold his sabre, and tore a hole through it. Huang Daoren shrieked like a pig being slaughtered.

Originally, Zhou Zishu was unwilling to interfere in affairs that were not his own. Liu Qianqiao was not a good person either; when he had let her off the previous time, it had already been on behalf of her skills of disguise, which meant that she could have had some affiliation with the previous lord of the Four Seasons Manor. This time, however, he suddenly felt that such a woman who had spent her whole life--up till her moment of death--foolishly waiting for a scumbag should die untouched, if she had to die. There was no need to suffer such humiliation from scoundrels like Huang Daoren.

Until now, Huang Daoren and the other two had never seen Zhou Zishu's actual face. Upon his sudden emergence, the three of them froze for a moment. Willow Green Grandpa stared at him, and asked, "Who are you?"

Zhou Zishu lifted the corner of his lips in a smile, but did not reply. All of a sudden, he glided over as swiftly as a storm, and picked up Liu Qianqiao's short sword. There was a blur before Huang Daoren, and then that man was already right in front of him. As he jerked back out of reflex, he felt an alarming chill at the front of his throat. In disbelief, Huang Daoren lowered his head and glanced down--his throat had been slit with the strokes of a 'ten!¹⁸⁰

My throat has split--this was Huang Daoren's last thought, after which blood from his throat spurted a good few feet. His whole body convulsed once, then toppled with a crash, and he became a dead Daoren.

The tip of his shoe touched the ground lightly, and Zhou Zishu half-spun around, the short sword in his hand still dripping blood. His long hair was carelessly held up with a strip of cloth--at this moment, a few strands of his long hair hung loose, and draped by his cheek. In the light of the dawn, an extremely pale and extremely handsome face looked at Peach Red Grandma and Willow Green Grandpa with the trace of a smile.

¹⁸⁰ The Chinese character for ten is 十

Peach Red Grandma and Willow Green Grandpa instinctively took a step backwards.

As though there was no strength in his legs, Zhou Zishu slowly walked over to them. The blood sluiced down the point of the short sword onto his hand, then through the gaps between his fingers, to drip a trail onto the ground.

The aura emanating from this young man at that moment was overbearing; the pressure from him nearly smothered Peach Red and Willow Green. With an enraged roar, Peach Red Grandma raised her cane and swung it at Zhou Zishu's head. In the blink of an eye, Zhou Zishu was no longer where he had been. Sensing sudden danger, Peach Red Grandma scrounged her energy together, and rolled forward. At that same moment, she felt a chill down her back. A great force struck her. Her vision went black, and she spewed a mouthful of blood--she thought that her own intestines might have been ruptured by the impact.

Willow Green Grandpa's eyes were wide. He looked at Peach Red Grandma who had been sent flying, possibly dead, and looked at the young man who was turning towards him. Without further hesitation, he abandoned his old wife and fled alone.

Zhou Zishu did not give chase. He dropped his gaze, set down the short sword, and knelt next to Liu Qianqiao. He reached out, intending to seal the acupoints near her continuously-bleeding wound, but Liu Qianqiao raised her head to look at him and shook her head with the slightest tilt--she was going to die, she knew.

Wen Kexing walked out of their hiding place, and stood behind Zhou Zishu silently.

Zhou Zishu asked softly, "The Lapis Armour is actually with Yu Qiufeng, but he ran, and asked you to distract them, didn't he?"

Liu Qianqiao glanced at him, but did not speak.

Zhou Zishu sighed. "I do not have any interest in the Lapis Armour. You're about to die, what's so difficult about nodding your head once?"

Wen Kexing laughed mockingly, and said from behind him, "Miss Liu, I told you early on that Yu Qiufeng isn't anything good."

Liu Qianqiao opened her mouth. Her voice was extremely weak; Zhou Zishu had to turn his ear to her slightly. He heard her murmur, "The willow is verdant in the serene surface of the lake; the flower keeps the distant moon company. Year after year, the same, same scene..."

Then the last spark of light in her eyes suddenly dissipated; her head lolled, and there was no life left in her. Without her permission, her mouth smiled, gentling her

scary mien. Because of this flawed face, she had squirrelled her true appearance away for a lifetime. Yet, she was destined to come into this world bare-faced, and leave bare-faced.

At the very end, she did not manage to complete that half of the “Song of the Raw Hawthorne”.

Zhou Zishu sighed, and reached out a hand to close her eyes gently.

The two men heard a burst of cackling, coarsened with age, come from behind them. That Peach Red Grandma had dodged fast--even though she was severely injured by the force of Zhou Zishu's palm strike, she was not dead. As she regurgitated blood, she pointed at Liu Qianqiao and laughed, "A husband and his wife are...are merely birds in the same forest. When disaster strikes, they fly their own separate ways...much less that her, her relationship with Yu was not even socially legitimate, haha...throughout history, women have always been fools for love, while men have always been shallow of heart. She... could not understand even this, evidently, she did not die an unfair death, hers was no unfair death!"

Zhou Zishu glanced back at her, but did not bother with her. He simply rose and strode back in the direction they had come from.

Wen Kexing followed behind him, and after they had covered some distance, he suddenly asked, “Your gongfu seems to be of a higher skill level now than it was when I first met you...why is this so?”

Zhou Zishu’s footsteps halted. When he looked back, there was a rare solemnity to Wen Kexing’s expression.

Zhou Zishu smiled, pointed at his own chest and said, “When I first met you, it was sealing half of my internal energy.”

“What about now?”

“Now, about four-fifths of it as it was at my peak has returned.”

Yet, Wen Kexing did not seem exceptionally happy to hear this, but merely fixed his gaze on him silently. Zhou Zishu turned around and continued walking ahead, remarking flippantly, “When I die, all the martial prowess I had at my peak will have returned.”

Chapter 61 - Formation

Cao Weining and Zhang Chengling were holding a bucket of faeces each. The stink blotted out the sky. Finding joy amidst misery, Cao Weining thought: A-Xiang is really full of wit and stratagems, a Zhuge amongst womankind.

Zhang Chengling did not hold the same grand worldview. He thought that Gu Xiang lacked eight lifetimes' worth of morals.

As the labourers, the two of them covered those night-soil buckets with lids, and placed much camouflage over them. Under Gu Xiang's direction, they arranged them in position on the roof, on the ground, creating the most disgusting formation in history so far--a night-soil bucket formation.

On the other hand, Military Strategist Gu covered her nose and stayed far away. After the buckets were in place, she beckoned the two over, her nose covered, and spoke to Zhang Chengling in a low voice, "Have you memorised the path I told you?"

Zhang Chengling nodded his head and said, "Be rest assured, Gu Xiang-jiejie. I won't stumble on the Drifting Clouds Nine Palaces Steps, shifu will break my legs otherwise."

Gu Xiang poked him in the head with the tip of her finger and said, "Take one wrong step, and you'll become Stinky Bug Zhang."

She took another glance at Cao Weining, swung her arm in a wide arc, and ordered, "Action!"

The three shadows diverged in the night. Like a bat, Gu Xiang clung onto the eaves of the inn, entirely still. The girl's eyes were unusually bright in the darkness, like those of a little critter that was quietly biding its time to pounce on its prey. Thereafter, her gaze flashed; out of the corner of her eye, she caught the firelight that was rising in the courtyard behind, and knew that Cao Weining was already over there. They only had to wait for the fire to blaze a little higher...

Then she heard Cao Weining, straining his vocal cords, howl from the courtyard, "Oh no! The building's going to collapse!"

Gu Xiang nearly choked on a breath of qi. Over on his side, Cao Weining had been singularly preoccupied by the thought of Gu Xiang on the roof, and had casually shouted such a sentence. Once the words were out of his mouth, he, too, had realised that he had said the wrong thing, and hastily corrected himself, "No, no, I mean, fire! Fire! Run, quick! The building's burning!"

A beat later, chaos followed within the inn. A few women in black, unkempt and hastily dressed, rushed out to check on the disturbance outside. The other guests

within the inn joined in on the commotion, clamour rising from all corners of the tranquil night. Gu Xiang flipped off the roof, pulled up her mask, and nonchalantly blended into the crowd under the cover of confusion, then stealthily flung a few messenger flares from her wide sleeve. Those messenger flares shot out, and exploded amidst the noisy crowd. As the small licks of flame sprung up, shrieks rose from all around. Someone shouted, "The fire has gotten into the rooms!", and everyone scrambled in different directions, forcing the women in black apart from one another in the mayhem.

Gu Xiang frowned inwardly. This chaos was exceeding her expectations a little, and they would have to proceed more cautiously from here on out. Yet, it seemed like the heavens were helping her. Just as she was standing in the corridor like a fool, a woman in black who had been separated from the rest by the crowd shoved her abruptly and shouted, "Go check on that Gao wench! Someone could be doing this on purpose!"

Gu Xiang yearned to cackle aloud, but quickly submitted herself to be dragged along, and together, they headed towards the room that imprisoned Gao Xiaolian--her heart was beating faster and faster in great excitement. Yet, misfortune struck in her joy. That woman that was dragging her along had a keen sense of alertness; just as she was about to push the door open and enter, she abruptly glanced back at Gu Xiang strangely, and asked, "What are you trembling for?"

Gu Xiang's heart sank. Scrambling to put on a nervous demeanour, she mumbled, "I...I'm...scared..."

She did not know who this woman had mistaken her for; young maidens of her age were probably around the same build and size. The woman shot Gu Xiang a condescending glance, and pushed the door open to enter as she humphed. "Look at how useless and cowardly you are. Stand guard at the door. If you dare to let anyone in..."

Before she could finish her sentence, there was a sudden chill at her waist. She raised her head to look at Gu Xiang in disbelief--she felt her whole body go numb, and an indescribable frost crept downward from her waist. Unable to move, she toppled over. Gu Xiang hurriedly extended a hand to support her, and said softly, "Mind the threshold."

Then she closed the door from inside the room in one fluid movement. Gao Xiaolian was tied to the table. There was another woman in black in the room, who heard the commotion just as she lit the candle, looked over in their direction, and saw Gu Xiang's panic as she supported the unlucky soul.

The other woman in black came over, squatted down, and asked anxiously, "What's happened to her?"

Gu Xiang said in a low voice, "I... I don't know, she suddenly collapsed just like that. Could she be having a seizure?"

The woman in black was checking on her comrade's condition when she heard Gu Xiang's impromptu spark of creativity, and instantly raised her head in alarm. "You..."

Gu Xiang had been lying in wait for her. She raised her sleeve, and a cloud of white smoke billowed out, hurtling at the face of the woman in black. Knowing how lethal it was, the woman in black instantly held her breath. But she did not expect the sudden chill on her neck; a dagger had sprung into Gu Xiang's hand, and when she had held her breath in panic, blinded by the white smoke, Gu Xiang had slashed a large opening across her throat.

Gu Xiang had always been ruthless in her execution--in an instant, that woman's vocal cords were shredded, and she collapsed to the floor without a sound, dead. Gao Xiaolian was frozen in shock.

Gu Xiang yanked off the mask on her face and threw it aside as she said, "Stupid woman, scared of even flour." As she spoke, her hands did not pause in the slightest; in a few strokes, she sliced through the ropes on Gao Xiaolian. In surprised joy, Gao Xiaolian made to climb to her feet, but before the words of gratitude could even leave her mouth, the door was suddenly kicked in. Cao Weining scrambled in, falling over himself, saying, "A-Xiang, hurry! I can't hold them back any longer!"

At this moment, Zhang Chengling climbed up outside the window and waved vigorously at them. Gu Xiang shoved Gao Xiaolian and told Zhang Chengling, "Carry her!"

The three of them had discussed this beforehand. Cao Weining put his mask back on at top speed and hastily pulled on a long black skirt. Without caring about anything else, Zhang Chengling carried Gao Xiaolian on his back, and sprinted away from the inn swiftly, with Gu Xiang and Cao Weining pretending to chase after him. Gu Xiang even shouted for show, "Little thief, you won't escape!"

They put on an act of frailty as they pretended to chase him; Gu Xiang faked a limp, and Cao Weining clutched at his chest, wobbling as though he was about to collapse at any time. Halfway, a strong gale struck them from behind, and that Black Poison Hag's old and hoarse voice rang out, "All of you, get out of my way!"

She barrelled past the two of them like a whirlwind.

A bunch of women in black followed close behind the Black Poison Hag, overtaking these two good sisters--sisters who had not forgotten to chase the enemy down even though they 'had been ambushed and grievously injured'.

Gu Xiang and Cao Weining exchanged glances. The cripple was no longer crippled, and the heart-clutcher stopped clutching at his heart, fleeing by the route they had discussed beforehand.

Zhang Chengling and Gao Xiaolian were in a far more harrowing situation. Not knowing why he insisted on carrying her as he murmured under his breath continuously, Gao Xiaolian felt that she was a burden on him. Earlier, she had already recognised Cao Weining and Zhang Chengling in a split second; at this moment, she was touched, and said, "Little brother, put me down. I still have my martial ability, I can run along with you."

In the pauses between his recitation of the mantra, Zhang Chengling eked out a hurried reply, "No way, we still have some distance to go." Once he recalled the "night soil formation" ahead, he was despondently anxious and dared not to be distracted, reciting the mantra with his full concentration.

Gao Xiaolian could read the situation; seeing that he said this with much solemnity, she understood that they might have made some sort of arrangement, shut her mouth, and did not disturb him. Then she saw that he, utilising some unknown technique, moved as swiftly as a phantom, and was quietly surprised. It had barely been a year, she thought, what extraordinary encounter had this youth had, to become this skilled?

When Zhang Chengling caught the whiff of a refreshing stench, he knew that they had arrived. His nerves were pulled taut, and his ears pricked to capture any sound--he knew that the Black Poison Hag was nearly catching up to them. If it were any other time, he would have been scared to his wits' end, but in this moment, he remembered that he was carrying another person, and this person was counting on him to save her life. It didn't matter if something happened to him, but if this Miss Gao was recaptured by those bad women, things would not end well for her. He felt himself grow mightier, as though strength had flooded through his whole body; with a loud shout, he, astonishingly, increased his speed once more.

On this night, Zhang Chengling had actually triumphed over his timid, pushover self unknowingly, and his mentality had advanced by quite a lot. If he went even further, his martial skill would have been elevated a tier as well. Sweeping all other thoughts out of his mind, only what Gu Xiang had said remained in his head--he could not take even one wrong step.

Faster and faster his recitation grew, and like a shadow, he shot along the route, passing underneath the night soil formation that they had set up earlier. Just as the Black Poison Hag had thought that she was about to catch up to them, that little thief sped up out of the blue. How could she be willing to let them go? Instantly, she pursued them madly at full speed.

Abruptly, she felt a thread in the air catch on her sleeve. Something tugged at her; the Black Poison Hag's first thought was that there was a trap mechanism, and without time to think about it too closely, she darted away. Thereafter, a night soil bucket tucked away in a hidden spot poured onto where she had been standing, its contents splashing forth.

Despite everything, the Black Poison Hag was a woman after all, and was a bit of a germaphobe. How could she stand something like this? Dreading that even a drop of it would get on her, she hastily retreated a few steps, only to feel her foot bump into something. Her heart lurched. Pinpointing its position by listening to the sounds, she dodged another calamity, but before she even touched the ground, the third night soil bucket was toppled by the second, and cascaded right onto the Black Poison's Hag head.

The crone was livid. She longed to howl, "Little thief, I'll dice your corpse into a million pieces!", but she could not open her mouth, for fear that a tragedy would strike once she did. That youth who carried Gao Xiaolian on his back was long gone--she wanted to dice his corpse into a million pieces, but she did not even have a target.

Her disciples' luck was no better than hers. Every one of them succumbed to this night soil bucket formation; this brilliant, stupendous group of women in black who would slaughter any god or deity that stood in their way were vanquished thus unspeakably.

Zhang Chengling only set Gao Xiaolian down when he reached their rendezvous point, wheezing for air. Gu Xiang and Cao Weining had been waiting for them; once they saw the two people, they immediately came up to receive them. Zhang Chengling said, "They, they...won't come chasing, will they?"

Gu Xiang patted her own chest and said, "That's impossible, as long as she's a female, she won't dare to run about in the night with her face covered in shit!"

Cao Weining said excitedly, "A-Xiang's formation is extraordinary!"

Gu Xiang seemed to be a little embarrassed by his praise, and quickly flapped her hand as she said, "I'm only immediately applying what I just learnt, this is something that Lord Seventh taught me...oh, yes, Lord Seventh also said that if we run into Zhou Xu, we have to send word to them!"

Gao Xiaolian was immensely grateful and thanked them profusely. Gu Xiang, busy with sending a message to Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman, waved it away. After a hectic night, the four of them changed out of the disguises on them, and returned, under Zhang Chengling's lead, to the inn that Zhou Zishu and the others were staying in to reconvene with those two men.

Gao Xiaolian was very silent on the journey. Although Cao Weining and the rest had their questions, Zhang Chengling would not ask; Cao Weining observed her

expression, sensed that she was in a bad mood, and found it rude to pry; Gu Xiang did not care at all. Joyfully, she sprinted towards the inn Zhou Zishu and the rest were staying in, and after Zhang Chengling had pointed the way, she went to Wen Kexing's door and yelled, "Master! Have you missed m..."

Before she could finish her sentence, the door of the room next to her opened. Wen Kexing glared viciously at her, lowering his voice to whisper, "What are you making a ruckus for? A-Xu has just fallen asleep."

Gu Xiang froze with her mouth hanging open. She pointed at Wen Kexing and said, "Master, you, you, you..."

Even if he were dead, Zhou Zishu would still have been woken by this holler of hers. Resigned, he rose from bed, draped a robe over his shoulders, and walked out. He nodded at Gu Xiang and Cao Weining first, glared fiercely at Zhang Chengling next, and spotted Gao Xiaolian, who he did not expect to see. Surprised, he bypassed the rest of them to stand in front of her, and asked, "Miss Gao, why are you here?"

Gao Xiaolian had met Wen Kexing before, and had just heard him say "A-Xu". Immediately realising who this stranger in front of her could be, she asked, "Are you...Zhou..."

"Yes, it is indeed this humble one." Zhou Zishu nodded. Spying her unkempt and disheveled state, he quickly instructed the waiter to prepare food and a room for her.

Gu Xiang was still staring with wide eyes off to the side. "Master, have you finally...r-r-ravaged him?"

Wen Kexing swept an eye over her, and swept his gaze over Cao Weining, who was simpering in ingratiation as though he was meeting his father-in-law, and remarked, "Don't think you can be presumptuous just because you have your husband's family now."

Then he ignored the young couple, and came downstairs to do up the buttons of Zhou Zishu's outer robe with care.

The few of them tidied up before they sat down. Zhou Zishu first listened to Gu Xiang chatter about the whole rescue process, welcomed Gao Xiaolian next, before he finally asked gently, "Miss Gao, why are you here alone, and why were you captured by the Black Poison Hag? Where is Hero Gao?"

Gao Xiaolian was silent for a long moment. Then, abruptly, a wail burst forth from her. Sobbing, she choked out, "My father...my father is dead!"

Chapter 62 - Equilibrium

Once she uttered these words, the few of them were briefly taken aback. Zhou Zishu sat up slightly straighter, but did not pursue any line of questioning, as though he was turning something over in his mind while he waited for Gao Xiaolian to vent her emotions. He frowned.

Wen Kexing eyed him, and with a very natural gesture, placed a xiaolongbao in the bowl in front of Zhou Zishu with his chopsticks. Glimpsing this out of the corner of her eye, Gu Xiang hastily lowered her head, and pretended not to have seen it out of propriety. A while later, she stealthily raised her head again, her gaze roaming between the two men. She thought about it, felt that the situation was uneven, and placed one in Cao Weining's bowl too.

Cao Weining was instantly overwhelmed with delight by the favour he was shown.

On the other hand, Zhang Chengling was the only one who commiserated with Gao Xiaolian. He could not bear to see her cry, but as he was inarticulate, he did not know what to say. He could only carefully accompany her in her grief, and after a while, finally came up with something to say, "Miss...Miss Gao, don't be sad, my dad's dead too..."

Zhang Chengling bit his lip, silently reprimanding himself. It was nonsensical for him to say something like this--just because his own dad had died, did that mean someone else's dad deserved to die? He started to panic a little. However, Gao Xiaolian, knowing that he meant well, did not take it to heart. She squeezed out a smile for him in thanks.

At this moment, Cao Weining spoke up, "I heard that a while ago, Hero Gao personally escorted Hero Shen's remains back to Shuzhong. Afterwards...did something happen then?"

Gao Xiaolian reached up to wipe her eyes clean of tears and lowered her gaze, her expression settling--while this girl had been sensible since they first met her, she was, after all, a young lady from a wealthy family. Even when she left the house, she had her shixions to protect her, and she carried a hint of inexperienced naivete. Yet, in the short span of a few months, she had gone through too much and seemed to have become another person entirely. Her voice still quivered, but her emotions were already reined in.

She spoke softly, "Back then, Daddy said he wanted to send Uncle Shen off on a last journey with the other heroes. At first, he agreed to take Deng-shixiong and I along, but he suddenly changed his mind the day before we set off, and made me stay behind. I...at that point in time, I thought he was going back on his word, and had a fight with him, but Daddy was adamant about not bringing me along. He even said...even said a lot of things that didn't sound nice, things like how the current

situation was tense, that we might run into much trouble on the way, that the Ghosts from the Valley are still lurking about outside, and I would slow down their journey...”

A teardrop slid down her cheek. Zhou Zishu said gently, “Your father must have been concerned about something that was inconvenient for him to voice, and made you stay behind out of consideration for your safety.”

Gao Xiaolian nodded. “But I...”

Zhou Zishu said, “As long as you are safe and sound, you are preserving his bloodline on this earth, and have not let your father’s efforts go to waste.”

Gao Xiaolian bit her lip. A long while later, she continued, “I was unwilling to accept it, and planned to follow them sneakily after they left. But who knew that Daddy...Daddy sent people to keep me under surveillance, and left with shixiong. I sulked for half a month, before the shixionsgs and shidis guarding me released me, and said that this was also an arrangement Daddy had made. They wanted to escort me to a place to meet up with them. At that time...I felt that something was amiss.”

The few of them could not care about eating as they listened to her. Only Wen Kexing’s expression was still rather placid; he did not interrupt, but ate slowly and with a rarely-seen genteel elegance. Occasionally, he placed small portions in Zhou Zishu’s bowl with his chopsticks.

Gao Xiaolian said, “I snuck away when their guard was down, planning to go to Shuzhong to find Daddy, but...but I ran into Deng-shixiong on the journey there. He was grievously injured, and someone was hunting him down.”

Cao Weining asked, “Was it the Ghost Valley...”

Abruptly, Zhou Zishu cut him off, opening his mouth to ask, “Do you recognise the person who was hunting him down? Were they people from the heroes’ gathering at Dongting?”

Cao Weining stared at him with his eyes wide and mouth agape. He swallowed, then murmured slowly, “Zhou...Zhou-xiong, these words are probably best not spoken flippantly?”

Zhou Zishu leant back on his chair, and said in a soft voice, “According to Miss Gao, Hero Gao brought people from various major sects with him. If they were really the Ghosts, why would they hunt Deng Kuan down when Hero Gao has the advantage in numbers? Whose lives are they desperate to lose?”

Gao Xiaolian started to tremble all over. “Yes...you’re right, they were the ordinary folk from the orthodox sects. They said that Daddy was the one who killed

Uncle Shen, said he was the culprit who harmed the Zhang Family and the Taishan sect leader, colluded with the evil Ghosts to...to obtain the Lapis Armour. They even revealed the story of what Rong Xuan and the rest did all those years ago, how they stole the secret manuals of various sects with Daddy's involvement, and for the sake of his own reputation, Daddy concealed this part of the past, even attempting to kill witnesses, claim it for his own..."

Eyes wide, Zhang Chengling bolted to his feet. "What? He..."

Zhou Zishu raised his head to look at him, and commanded coldly, "Little tyke, sit down."

Zhang Chengling looked at him. "Shifu, she said...she said..."

Gao Xiaolian's voice suddenly soared in pitch as she screeched, "It's not true, they're talking nonsense, they're maligning my dad, my dad isn't that kind of person!"

Zhou Zishu merely said coolly, "Indeed, Hero Gao is not that kind of person. Miss Gao, do continue."

His voice was low, and seemed to have a sort of special soothing effect. Gao Xiaolian glanced at him, and felt that she had overreacted. Slightly ashamed, she cast her eyes downward, and continued, "Deng-shixiong told me to run...I was terrified out of my wits, and fled blindly. I was also afraid that someone would be chasing me down, so I avoided crowds on the road. Shixiong was grievously injured, I don't know if he...if he's still..."

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing exchanged a glance. By the looks of it, they thought, Deng Kuan's fate was most likely grim.

Cao Weining said, "Then you fled blindly, ran into the Black Poison Hag, and accidentally let your identity slip? Was this what tempted them, and made them kidnap you?"

Gao Xiaolian nodded. "I didn't accidentally let it slip. Someone had caught up to me, during which the Black Poison Hag interfered and took me away...they wholly believed that Daddy had the Lapis Armour, and that now that he was dead, those ghastly things would definitely be in my hands..."

She was yet another Zhang Chengling.

Gu Xiang interjected, "Oh, yes yes, after we were separated at Dongting the last time, Cao-dage and I bumped into Lord Seventh. Lord Seventh said that they were going to think of a way to save Zhou Xu's life, and we looked for you together for a while. But we just didn't know which faraway place where a bird wouldn't even shit you two ran off to in order to get hitched..."

Hearing that her words were becoming more ludicrous, Cao Weining hastily coughed once to cut her off.

Yet, Wen Kexing paused. Ignoring Gu Xiang's nonsense, he asked, "Lord Seventh said that there is a solution?"

Gu Xiang said, "The Great Shaman said that he's thought of some, and made us contact them after we've found Zhou Xu--according to rumours, those women in black are the surviving foes of the Nanjiang Black Shaman years back. The Great Shaman killed most of them in the early years, but then they conned a bunch of silly wenches from somewhere into becoming their followers, and have been scraping by for a good few years. This time, they've come to muddy the waters, and the Great Shaman said that this was a good opportunity to net them all. Cao-dage and I had nothing to do, so we went to keep a lookout, all in the name of gathering merits by doing good deeds. Who knew that we'd bump into Miss Gao? This time, we've struck gold gathering merits!"

Wen Kexing glanced at her with a strange look, frowned slightly, but did not say anything. Instead, he turned his head to ask Zhou Zishu, "What do you think?"

Zhou Zishu was silent for a long while, before he sighed and said, "Almost all those who know what happened have died, leaving only that one person. The victors and the losers are evident--why do you need to ask me such a question?"

At the same moment, Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman, the subjects under discussion, were also at an inn. Lord Seventh was happily playing with a chopstick, and was childishly trying his hardest to stand it on its end.

Unfortunately, the head of that chopstick was not flat, but had a slight curve to it. He had been trying for a long while without success, but was still determinedly positioning it with his full concentration, even neglecting his meal.

The Great Shaman watched him for a long time, then finally sighed. Gently, like he was coaxing a child, he said, "Beiyuan, stop playing. Eat your meal properly."

Lord Seventh made a noise of agreement, but still his gaze did not shift from the chopstick. The Great Shaman had to feed him spoonful by spoonful; this Great Shaman of Nanjiang looked frosty, and was not a man of many words, but he seemed to have infinite patience for Lord Seventh.

Lord Seventh was used to it, and ate each spoonful he was fed. The Great Shaman couldn't help himself from asking, "What are you doing?"

Lord Seventh said, "I want to stand this chopstick on its end."

The Great Shaman frowned, not understanding what he meant by that. He plucked the unfortunate chopstick from his hand, and jabbed it lightly at the table. As though the table surface was made of tofu, the Shaman punctured a hole into it, and the chopstick was planted steadfast in it.

Lord Seventh glared at him. "This method of yours is one of brute force, you can't do it like this."

The Great Shaman smiled indulgently, but did not say anything else, and merely watched him tinker around without comment as he fed him.

Lord Seventh muttered to himself, "One chopstick can't stand on its own. I need to find another chopstick."

As he spoke, he picked up the other chopstick. After a very long while, he had indeed precariously balanced the two chopsticks on their heads, propping each other up on the table. Carefully, Lord Seventh pulled his hands away, and started to speak extremely softly, as though he was afraid that a large breath would topple the chopsticks he had gone through so much trouble to erect.

The Shaman heard him say, "Achieving equilibrium--is really too difficult."

The Great Shaman was slightly confused, and asked, "What?"

Cheerily, Lord Seventh said, "If you desire a situation to result in something long-lasting and stable, it must be in equilibrium. Harmony is one sort of equilibrium, and division is another sort of equilibrium. The way to equilibrium is none other than..."

The Great Shaman pinched his nose bridge and interrupted him. "Beiyuan, stop rambling about irrelevant things."

Yet, Lord Seventh was not angry. As though he was used to being cut off, he continued, "To achieve the equilibrium you desire, there are many conditions that have to be fulfilled, and it is terribly difficult to achieve this. Firstly, both sides have to be equally matched. There cannot be a stronger or weaker side, otherwise, the stronger party will devour the weaker one. Being equally matched alone won't do either--there is a possibility that two equally-matched sides will struggle to the death to produce a victor. There still has to be a few natural, or man-made barricades that must not be crossed. Both parties will be afraid to strike out, as they are wary of destroying everything else but the rat that is their target. Both parties have their considerations, and refuse to be the instigators...ordinarily, in order for such a perfect and elegant equilibrium to happen, various coincidences have to occur in tandem--in other words, the heavens have constructed it. If it is a product of human hands, they need to advance with exceedingly cautious steps, laying down their pieces with care. One wrong step, and they'll lose the whole game. However, it is extraordinarily easy to ruin the situation."

As he spoke, he reached out to whisk one of the chopsticks away. The other chopstick fell accordingly and crashed right onto a plate of pastries, producing thin hairline cracks.

Lord Seventh smiled and said, "It only needs to be like this--remove one of the boards, and the situation in equilibrium is instantly dashed. But...why remove this board?"

The Great Shaman asked curiously, "What is it that you have spotted this time?"

Lord Seventh picked up the tea bowl, dipped his head and took a sip, then shook his head and smiled. "Reveal that, I cannot."

Chapter 63 - The Eve Of

A startling bolt of lightning cleaved apart the night sky of early summer at the tail end of spring. The dusk was moonless and starless.

The icy rain fell, rinsing the world in bloom clean on a late spring's night.

The roof of the decrepit room in the inn was leaking. There was only a smidgen of light in the room; a man in red was toying with the glowing candlewick with his fingers, his expression one of deadly frost.

He was none other than Sun Ding.

A sudden breeze swept in through the window, and the flame trembled slightly. Sun Ding's gaze focused. He raised his head to look at the Poisonous Scorpion in black who had come in through the window, silently waiting for the news that he brought him.

This Poisonous Scorpion in black produced a strip of paper from the front of his clothes and handed it over. Sun Ding took it, looked it over, then touched it to the candle flame and set it alight. A bloodthirsty smile unfurled on his face, turning the ghastly half of his face even more crimson and horrifying. Raising his hand, he rolled his sleeve up. His palm had turned purple--he grabbed at empty air, as though he had seized something and was grinding it into smithereens, and then rubbed his fingertips together lightly.

Like he had received the order, the Poisonous Scorpion turned and leapt out of the window.

It was like the two people had put on a soundless puppet show.

Sun Ding raised his head slightly, a satisfied expression blooming on his face. He murmured to himself, "Xue Fang, you have finally...shown yourself."

He wrapped his coat tight around himself like a bat, and exited the room with a crazed smile on his face--he and Xue Fang had been grappling for eight years. How many more eight-years could a mortal on this earth have? It was time for a new Master of Fengya Mountain. Once he got rid of Xue Fang and got ahold of the Lapis Armour, Sun Ding believed, there was no one else in this world who could stand in his way.

No one else would restrict him from leaving that place of ghosts and demons, and he would finally eradicate the false righteousness and shallow sects--why talk about good and evil in this world?

There were no more than victors and losers.

Xue Fang's traces had been exposed; he was a sitting duck for Sun Ding to destroy in one fell swoop.

Concurrently, in that insignificant corner deep in the red light district, the Head Scorpion, dressed head to toe in black, was fiddling with a handful of black and white checkers. The checkers were separated from one another, and then shuffled together in the next moment. A smile lurking with intent slowly formed on his face.

Zhou Zishu and his party remained at the inn to await Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman. While they had been enjoying themselves in the Puppet Manor in Shuzhong, forgetting about the world outside as they existed in a blissful dream outside of time, the tense situation in the pugilist world of the Central Plains a hair's breadth away from chaos had reached the stage where the thousands of potential changes that could occur in a single breath were out of anyone's control.

Today, the five major clans had split; their alliances disintegrated long ago, their past glory now buried under three feet of yellow earth. Gao Chong and Zhao Jing were considered to be the only ones to have survived.

Gao Chong's wicked plot of colluding with Xue Fang, the Hanged Ghost from the Ghost Valley, to get rid of Zhao Jing, the last obstacle, was finally exposed when it failed, and the news threw the whole pugilist world into uproar.

In an instant, everything could be clearly explained--knowing the precise location of every piece of the Lapis Armour, and the weaknesses of every single person; able to steal the Lapis Armour from the Zhao Family Manor with ease, to manipulate all the heroes under the sky in the palm of his hand, to trick Shen Zhen out of the Lapis Armour, and steal from under his own tight surveillance...other than Hero Gao, the possessor of the Realm's Command, was there anyone else who could accomplish all these?

Those who had been duped so wholly finally saw the light. At once, many emotions surged within them, but they did not know how to articulate them.

Gao Chong died roaring with laughter, as though he had gone mad. The Hanged Ghost Xue Fang was injured and missing, Zhao Jing was heavily injured, and no one knew where the Lapis Armour was.

Subsequently, there were rumours that before the Huashan sect leader Yu Qiufeng had gone to the Shen Clan, he had schemed late into the night with Gao Chong in secrecy...on the day the Zhao Family Manor's Lapis Armour had gone missing, Yu Qiufeng's son, Yu Tianjie, had fled from the Zhao Family Manor late at night. At first, the masses had all believed that he was killed by the Hanged Ghost. However, the body that had been found was headless; reflecting upon it now, who could truly verify that the deceased was Yu Tianjie back then?

Did they still have to explain the winding complexities to this?

Deng Kuan was dead, Gao Xiaolian was missing. As though they had schemed it beforehand, everyone in the Gao Family Manor had scattered like a flock of alarmed creatures, and Yu Qiufeng's whereabouts were unknown--at present, the worst case was that all five pieces had landed in the hands of the Ghosts. The martial store of thirty years ago was about to be unlocked, and that demonic Six Harmonies Cultivation Mantra was about to be unveiled once more.

The darkest moment of the pugilist world in the Central Plains had descended.

On the seventh night they were staying at the inn, a good while after midnight, Zhou Zishu caught his breath after the torment of this night. Unable to sleep, he cradled a jar of wine in his arms, took a chipped bowl, and sat on the roof to sip at it.

Gu Xiang was sitting in the small courtyard, dazedly staring up at the sky, her back to Zhou Zishu. Even with her level of martial ability, she did not detect that there was someone on the roof behind her.

It was rare that she was not raucous; she sat there quietly with her chin in her hand, her long and slender legs outstretched. She was holding a blade of grass in her hand, and fiddled with it every now and then. With that manner of hers, she, in fact, gave one the feeling that she stood alone in the cold wind and dew, sober enough to know that the memory of starry nights of yesteryear were no more.¹⁸¹

Wen Kexing pushed the door open and walked outside. Looking at the back of Gu Xiang's silhouette, he sighed all of a sudden, as though a thread of wistful melancholy was unfurling within him from seeing a daughter grown, under his wing.¹⁸² Slowly, he walked out of the room, raised his head to glance at Zhou Zishu, and then sat quietly by Gu Xiang's side.

Gu Xiang looked at him, and said without cheer, "Master."

Wen Kexing smiled. This smile of his did not have the ribald air of a ruffian, but was instead very faint, almost gentle. He asked, "Why, did you and Famous Scholar Cao have a tiff? Did he infuriate you?"

Gu Xiang continued to say without much cheer, "If he dares to, this old maid will castrate him."

¹⁸¹ From Qing Dynasty poet Huang Jingren's Qihuai.

¹⁸² From Bai Juyi's Song of Everlasting Sorrow, describing how the Yang family's child (the famed Consort Yang) has grown into a beautiful maiden.

Wen Kexing started to self-reflect. A proper maiden, who looked just like any other maiden; where had he erred in raising her, that she now had this sort of behaviour?

He yawned, patted her head roughly, and asked, “What is it then? It's the middle of the night and you are not asleep--what are you stewing in sorrow over in the courtyard?”

Gu Xiang gave him a listless glance, her chin in her hands, and did not speak.

Wen Kexing sighed. He patted Gu Xiang's head and said, “I say, why have you started going about to rescue people with that silly fool Cao Weining? Gathering merits by doing good deeds, too...why, are you afraid that the old men at Qingfeng Sword Sect will not allow Cao Weining to have you?”

Gu Xiang dropped her gaze. She puffed up her cheek and bit her lip, not saying a word, and picked at the tile on the ground with her index finger, as though she was still a very young girl.

When it came to contests of skill, she was fearless; of looks, she was equally dauntless, but she was afraid when it came to her status.

Even if she was undefeatable in martial arts, even if she was beautiful enough to topple cities, these could not triumph over her status. Claim that you're a maiden of good standing--who would believe you?

There was not even a single human at the foot of Fengya Mountain; could there be a maiden of good standing? That crazy, demented Master of the Ghost Valley had come across her when she was still an infant, and kept her by his side. She had neither father nor mother, and all that met her eye was either slaughter inflicted, or slaughter experienced--could she grow into a maiden of good standing?

Even Gu Xiang was lost. She had always gotten whatever she wanted, occasionally resorting to unscrupulous means, occasionally by being unreasonable and stubborn, and although her temper was nothing great at times...this was the first time she knew that she was a woman who did not belong to the light.

An ugly bride could still face the in-laws, but she was Purple Danger. She dared not.

Gu Xiang pondered about it for a long while, before she finally squeezed out a smile and told Wen Kexing, “That spouse of yours has it much better. He doesn't have to worry about mouths to feed once he's eaten his fill--doesn't have a gaggle of aunts hanging around...aiyo!”

Before she could even finish her sentence, an object struck her skull. She raised her head to see Zhou Zishu looking down at her from above on the roof. The wine bowl in his hand was missing, and he was looking at Gu Xiang with the hint of a smile.

In pain from the impact, Gu Xiang clutched her skull and said to Wen Kexing, "Why don't you keep him in check!"

Zhou Zishu glided down from the roof, patted Wen Kexing's shoulder, and instructed, "Go and warm your lord's bed."

Wen Kexing made a very solicitous sound of agreement, and went without a second word. Gu Xiang's eyes widened as she sucked in a deep breath. Either this world had been turned upside down, she thought, or she was having a nightmare.

Zhou Zishu sat on the ground, sighed, and said, "What are you worrying blindly for, untroubled as you are? I haven't even been worried--at first, I thought that I could still live well for a year and a half, but it looks like there actually isn't that much time now. According to the Great Shaman, my meridians cannot withstand my internal energy...this gongfu has become a burden instead. At any time, the candle of my life might sputter out, I'll kick the bucket, and go off to meet King Yama in Hell."

Gu Xiang stared at him with wide eyes, not knowing what to say. A very long while later, she finally said in a small voice, "You really have terrible luck."

Zhou Zishu did not harbour any expectations for her terrible mouth to produce any nice words, but upon hearing this, a laugh escaped him nevertheless. He shook his head and said, "Fuck you. Gu Xiang, if you weren't a young lass, I would have to beat you up eight times a day."

Gu Xiang carefully scooted away, eyeing Zhou Zishu guardedly. Then she saw that this man was only drinking and had no real intention of hitting her, and heaved a sigh of relief. She thought about it, and magnanimously comforted him, "Lord Seventh said that the Great Shaman might have thought of a solution, maybe it can really save you?"

Zhou Zishu held a sip of wine in his mouth, savouring its taste for a long while as though he could not bear to swallow it down. A very long moment later, he finally said, "It's tough."

Gu Xiang blinked, and frowned, as though she did not really understand. A long while later, she finally poked Zhou Zishu with the tip of her shoe, and asked, "Are you suicidal?"

Zhou Zishu cast a glance at her and said, "You're suicidal."

“If that’s so, back then, why did you...”

Zhou Zishu started to smile.

As she looked at this man smile slowly, silently, Gu Xiang’s heart started beating a little faster out of no reason at all. She shifted her gaze away quickly; people said that beautiful women were harbingers of disaster, but as it turned out, beautiful men were too, she thought. She heard Zhou Zishu say, “To me, there are only two paths in life--either live well, or die well. For this, I can tolerate much for a period of time, but no one should ever entertain the thought of stopping me.”

He was a master of shrewd scheming, and soft-hearted at times, but when it was not the occasion for tenderness, his heart could be as unyielding as stone. He could be harsh on others, and could be harsh on himself too. He had always done as he wished, never withholding whatever he wanted as a heavy secret to bear in his heart. Even if he had paid a price that others would find too high for what it was worth, he never looked back, and never regretted his decision.

I throw my head back to laugh at the heavens, and proceed on my way; how can I be anyone mundane?¹⁸³

Zhou Zishu looked at Gu Xiang and said softly, “Lass, you decide who you are. Others have no say in this matter. I see that you are quite clever, but why do you not understand this?”

Gu Xiang listened to him, almost stupefied. Zhou Zishu finished the jar of wine in his hands, flung it to one side, and turned to return to his room.

He had just pushed the door open when a hand shot out of the darkness, gripped him tight, and slammed the door shut. Zhou Zishu did not put up any resistance, and let the man crash them down onto the bed. He lifted his gaze slowly to meet Wen Kexing’s.

After a long stillness, Wen Kexing suddenly dipped his head, and attacked his lips in a biting kiss. His breathing, a little frenzied, had an indescribable danger to it. A long moment later, Zhou Zishu abruptly shoved him away, lifted his elbow to ram it under Wen Kexing’s ribs, and flipped them over to cage Wen Kexing in between his hands below him. His loose, disheveled hair draped from his temples, and came to rest on Wen Kexing’s chest. In the darkness, there was only that pair of eyes, startlingly bright.

Zhou Zishu asked, “If I die, would it not be a loss for you?”

¹⁸³ From Li Bai’s 南陵別兒童入京 (Leaving My Family in Nanling For The Capital)

Wen Kexing did not speak. Abruptly, he turned his face aside, and clamped his teeth down on Zhou Zishu's wrist, as though he wanted to drink his blood and feast on his flesh. Zhou Zishu's brow scrunched in pain, but he did not pull away, and let Wen Kexing bite him without a single word. Blood seeped out slowly, sliding down the corner of Wen Kexing's mouth onto the bed sheets, soaking a large patch of it in an instant.

After an indeterminate period of time, when Zhou Zishu's braced arms were starting to quiver slightly, Wen Kexing finally closed his eyes slowly, loosened his jaw, and licked at the wound that he had inflicted. Then he sat up, pulled Zhou Zishu into his arms, tapped on his acupoints to stop the bleeding, and said, "I will. I will have never been this ravaged by loss in my whole life."

Zhou Zishu smiled soundlessly, and said, "You madman."

The madman tore a strip of cloth from his own inner robes, bandaged Zhou Zishu's wrist, then whipped the blanket open and wrapped them up in it. And just like that, they fell asleep in each other's arms, steeped in the smell of blood.

After another three days, Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman finally arrived.

Chapter 64 - A Gamble on Life

The two, with a weariness from hasty travel weighing down on them, seemed to have paid a visit to every corner of the Central Plains.

Upon meeting them, the Great Shaman did not waste any time on words, and started his examination of Zhou Zishu. Reflexively, Zhou Zishu presented his left wrist first; it was only halfway through bringing his arm up when he realised that this wrist was currently a little unpresentable, and silently retracted it for the other wrist.

Casting a glance at this, the Great Shaman asked offhandedly, “Did you injure your wrist?”

Zhou Zishu replied impassively, “Oh, it’s nothing. A dog bit me.”

The pulse at the wrist was one of the vital areas that a martial artist would guard fiercely; the Great Shaman, an honest man, paused upon hearing this, and reached out to place his fingers on Zhou Zishu’s wrist as he asked in bewilderment, “What breed of dog is so capable as to land a bite on you?”

Zhou Zishu was silent. Wen Kexing, who was sitting to the side and listening quietly, suddenly reached out to bring his arm to Zhou Zishu’s mouth, sighing, “I knew that you’d hold a grudge, petty as you are. You’ve not let me enter your room for three days because of this trivial matter. Here, for you, bite me back.”

Lord Seventh, who had just sat down to drink some tea, choked. Gu Xiang clutched at her face and turned away, expressing that she had seen nothing, nothing at all.

The corner of Zhou Zishu’s eye twitched. Reaching out to yank Wen Kexing’s hand out of the way, Zhou Zishu said, expression unchanging, “We’re in public. You should still preserve some sense of shame.”

Wen Kexing smiled, but this smile was a little perfunctory, like he could not eke out any more energy to tease Zhou Zishu with. Turning all his focus onto the Great Shaman, he stared at him unblinkingly as though a flower had suddenly bloomed on the Great Shaman’s face.

After a long while, the Great Shaman finally released Zhou Zishu’s wrist. Immediately, Wen Kexing asked, “How is it?”

The Great Shaman hesitated, then spoke honestly. “It is a little more severe than I thought--Manor Lord Zhou, have you suffered another injury these few days?”

Zhou Zishu pulled his wrist back, adjusted his sleeve with light movements, and dropped his gaze. As though it was nothing, he smiled and said, "When one roams the jianghu, injuries he does accrue."

Being Nanjiang-born, there were some slight differences to the Great Shaman's features from those of the Central Plains. His eyes were very deep-set, and appeared some degrees darker than those of others. He looked at Zhou Zishu with a steady gaze, then, after a while, said as though a revelation had dawned on him, "Manor Lord Zhou, if I did not have the slightest bit of confidence, I would not have come to look for you and cause you more trouble. You may be a little more at ease."

Zhou Zishu lifted his gaze to look at him, and squeezed out a laugh. "If it involves crippling my martial abilities..."

In that instant, a trace of fragile vulnerability, as though he could not maintain his expression any longer, flashed across the man's face, though it disappeared in an instant, as if it had only been a trick of the eye. The Great Shaman caught it clearly, so he nodded and said, "I will not suggest anything of the sort again. I have a method that can preserve your martial arts and save your life."

Wen Kexing sat up straight, about to speak up, but Zhou Zishu cut him off abruptly by asking, "If it can save my life, and preserve my martial arts...what will I need to sacrifice?"

His expression did not reveal the slightest bit of any other emotion. There was no trace of joy to be seen on his face; his gaze darkened, gravely solemn, as though he was not discussing his own injury with a healer and a friend, but was instead negotiating with some other party. Careful and thorough, paying close attention to all details, brimming with wariness--

How could such an effortless bargain exist in this world? Never could one have both fish and bear's paw for the same feast.¹⁸⁴ Even though the time he had spent alive could not be considered 'long', Zhou Zishu felt that it was sufficient for him to understand this lesson--that there was no such thing as a free lunch. Even if these two people before him could be considered 'friends' if he were hard-pressed to, even if he was familiar with how the Great Shaman operated, he still dared not believe it so easily.

Because...it could hurt, this thing called hope.

Lord Seventh gently set the tea bowl in his hand aside, and spoke. "In these six months or more, we have sought out not a small number of places--you are aware of the might of the Shaman's Valley, you even helped build it yourself back in the day.

¹⁸⁴ Bear's paw was a delicacy as early as the Zhou dynasty, though it has been outlawed in contemporary times as bears are now endangered.

As long as the herbs exist in this world, getting them is no trouble. Though these few herbs are more rare, we have, regardless, gathered all of them now."

As he spoke, the Shaman took out a small bottle from the front of his own robes. Zhou Zishu took it and opened the cap. In it was a full bottle's worth of pills. A medicinal fragrance with a slight hint of bitterness wafted out from within. The Great Shaman said, "Keep these. Take them at midnight. They can keep your Three Autumn Nails of the Seven Acupunctures from acting up, and gradually neutralise the poison on the nails."

Lord Seventh continued, "Even though the poison is troublesome to deal with, it is but a minor issue. The crux is your pinned meridians. If the nails are removed all of a sudden, your meridians will be unable to withstand your internal energy. You are unwilling to rid yourself of your martial arts, so it will take much effort to treat it, and I'm afraid that it is arduous to endure. However..."

He smiled. Looking at Zhou Zishu, he said, "While others might not be able to survive it, I feel that you might be able to give it a try."

The Shaman picked up where he left off. "We need someone with immense martial power, who can sever all your meridians in one instant--you can do this yourself too."

Hearing this, Gu Xiang, Cao Weining, and Zhang Chengling were shocked into stillness. Gu Xiang asked falteringly, "Once all his meridians are...severed, won't he die?"

The Great Shaman lifted his head to look at her. He did not deny it, but said, "There is indeed such a possibility. However, with how immense Manor Lord Zhou's martial power is, he will not die immediately. In this period of time, as long as someone preserves his meridians..."

Wen Kexing asked, "Do you mean that we can reconstruct his meridians?"

The Great Shaman nodded.

Wen Kexing's eyes brightened. He asked, "Will you be able to do it?"

The Great Shaman paused. Always very careful with his words, he never made overt promises. He said, "If I operate alone, I have a thirty-percent confidence of success. But this still depends on...whether the Manor Lord can hold out through it."

"Thirty-percent..." Wen Kexing's brow creased. "Only thirty-percent?"

The Great Shaman nodded. "Pardon my lack of expertise."

Yet, Zhou Zishu laughed out loud, the last of the gloom clearing from his face. "Fine, forget thirty-percent, I'll be willing to take my chances even if it's ten-percent. Anyway, it's no big loss."

He kept the small medicine bottle, and solemnly saluted the Great Shaman and Lord Seventh with his palm over his fist. "Many thanks."

The Great Shaman did not express much in reply--he merely nodded briefly, as though he had not presented someone with a bottle of life-saving medicine, but two mantous instead. On the other hand, Lord Seventh smiled and said, "What do you have to thank him for? If you do not let him repay the favour that we owe you from those years back, Wu Xi, this silly lad, will not be able to live out his life in peace."

The Great Shaman glanced at him, but did not refute it. He said, "Reconstructing your meridians will not be that easy. I will need a place of extreme cold, and you may be left with some vulnerability to frost. However, as you regain your martial abilities and attend to your health habitually, it should not be a problem."

Wen Kexing considered it, then asked, "What do you think of the peak of Changming Mountain?"

Legend had it that the peak of Changming Mountain was like an ethereal realm, on which resided the ancient monk and immortals--clouds and mist shrouded the halfway point of the mountain, and the snow on the peak stayed unmelted all year round. The Great Shaman thought about it, nodded, and said, "Why not give it a try?"

Wen Kexing said, "What a coincidence, that old glutton owes me so much money for food. Let's go to his den, and hold him responsible for our meals--A-Xiang."

Gu Xiang responded immediately.

Wen Kexing said to her, "Go run an errand for me. Find Ye Baiyi, and I'll line up two streets' worth of dowry for you, how's that?"

Gu Xiang bargained, "Three streets."

Wen Kexing tapped her on the head. "Two and a half, will that do? Stop peering into the gift horse's mouth, and get lost."

Rubbing her head, Gu Xiang tugged Cao Weining up to go prepare the luggage, but Wen Kexing stopped Cao Weining and said, "Don't listen to her. A man like you need not do the trivial chores like packing; don't accommodate her insouciant behaviour, come with me. Little tyke, cease your incompetence and get back to practice. You've slacked off from your training these few days. Are you waiting for your shifu to reprimand you? Get going, now--A-Xu, carry on with your conversation."

After speaking, he dragged Cao Weining out without further explanation. Zhang Chengling could read the room; sneaking a glance at his shifu, he sensed that the gaze with which his shifu was looking at him was starting to become a little unfriendly, and immediately scurried out with his tail between his legs. In an instant, only Zhou Zishu, Lord Seventh, and the Great Shaman were left, and the room became a lot more tranquil.

Lord Seventh gazed at Wen Kexing's retreating figure, and suddenly spoke. "This... jianghu friend of yours comes from a complex background, doesn't he. Have you been travelling with him all this while?"

Taken aback, Zhou Zishu paused, but did not deny it. Not understanding what Lord Seventh was intending by bringing this up out of the blue, he raised his head to look at Lord Seventh, only to see Lord Seventh smile and say, "Though he really treats you quite well. Apart from...I have never seen you be this serious about anyone--it's rather good, too."

Zhang Chengling was reciting his mantra in the small courtyard, and started to practice his martial arts move by move, exactly as he had been taught. Truth be told, with so many people arriving at this moment, and with so many events happening, this little youth's heart couldn't help but be a little agitated. He wanted to follow Gu Xiang and Cao Weining to look for Ye Baiyi. Zhang Chengling's reactions were slower than most children's, but he was not dumb.

About the matter with Black Poison Hag, Zhou Zishu did not say anything else outside of punishing him with an extra shichen of practice every day after knowing about the details. Zhang Chengling had acted rashly, but it had also allowed Zhou Zishu to witness his potential--even after experiencing all these ordeals, so numerous and so cruel, he still retained his purest heart. He never concealed his cowardice, but when the time called for bravery, he would never disappoint.

Zhou Zishu had always felt that if a boy didn't have a few scars on him, he was a piece of useless trash tucked under someone's wing, one that would never learn how to fly even if he reached adulthood peacefully and successfully.

Zhang Chengling did his own reflection too--he could not keep relying on shifu. Shifu was teaching him many things the way one would force feed a duck, and he had inscribed them into his memory by any means necessary. But there were many areas he did not understand, and still could not even with shifu breaking it down into fine pieces for him. He needed to train through practical experience.

Now that shifu's injury was at its most critical juncture, Zhang Chengling felt that he shouldn't stay by shifu's side, clueless and confused. He should leave for the world beyond, and do something for him.

As he started to daydream, the moves he was executing descended into turmoil.

Wen Kexing spotted it from afar, but did not say anything. He was in turmoil himself--only a thirty-percent confidence of success. In his life, he had faced countless life-or-death situations; each time, surviving with thirty-percent confidence was already a very decent performance. But...it was A-Xu.

Wen Kexing only came back to his senses when Cao Weining called out to him. Cao Weining was looking cautiously at him, waiting for him to speak. Gu Xiang had said that she was raised by this man. A sudden sense of fearful respect, as though he was facing the father-in-law, rose within Cao Weining, and he smiled ingratiatingly, "Wen-xiong summoned me out here because..."

Wen Kexing looked at him. It was as if he suddenly did not know where to start; after a long while, he finally began, "I...when I was ten or so years old, a half-grown child myself, I took A-Xiang in. I knew her father and mother--they had died, and she was too young then, still swaddled in blankets. Her mother had hidden her somewhere; their enemies had not noticed her, and she managed to escape with her life."

Cao Weining didn't even dare to make a single noise, listening on with an expression near pious.

Wen Kexing continued, "She's actually not my maidservant...although we address each other like master and servant, I have never treated that lass as an outsider--she is like my own little sister."

He smiled, paused, then added, "If I were to feign some seniority--I watched her grow up, so she is a little like my daughter. The place we stayed in when we were younger is not somewhere meant for humans to live in. I was a child too, and stumbled many times over the course of raising her. I burnt her mouth the first time I fed her congee--for A-Xiang to survive until now, it wasn't easy on me, but in truth...it wasn't easy on her too."

Vaguely understanding what Wen Kexing was getting at, Cao Weining said with a serious expression, "Rest assured, Wen-xiong. In this lifetime of mine, from now until the moment I die, every single day and every one moment included, there will not be even a single instance where I do something that will fail A-Xiang."

Wen Kexing glanced at him, and said with the ghost of a smile, "Don't make such promises."

Cao Weining raised a hand, and made an oath to the sky, "The heavens and earth are my witnesses."

As though he feared that Wen Kexing did not believe him, Famous Scholar Cao uttered in desperation the only sentence in his life that--even though it was, as expected, wrong--a listener could not bring himself to laugh at. He said, "Even the eternal sky and earth will fade one day, but this love is everlasting."¹⁸⁵

Wen Kexing looked at him with a strange expression, and asked, "Even if she might not be who you think she is? Even if...you will realise that you don't know her, after all?"

Cao Weining said, "Be rest assured, of course I know her."

Wen Kexing smiled, and picked up a pebble. He threw it at Zhang Chengling, calling out, "Little tyke, what are you daydreaming about? Don't be distracted!"

Be rest assured, of course I know her--A-Xiang, you've worried unnecessarily.

¹⁸⁵ The original quote from Bai Juyi's *The Song of Everlasting Regret* is 天长地久有时尽，此恨绵绵无绝期: Even the eternal sky and earth will fade one day, but this regret is everlasting.

Chapter 65 - Alarmed

Two twined together on the warm and scented sheets, the room charged with a carnal atmosphere. The Scorpion was seated to one side, watching on in complete stillness like a shadow.

The two people on the bed seemed to be getting into it, their moans growing louder. If one took a closer look, the people he had chosen this time were in fact two youths; a long while later, they finally recovered from the last vestiges of ardour. Exchanging looks, they draped their clothes over themselves, and came to kneel on one knee before the Scorpion, bodies half-covered.

Pickily, the Scorpion set down his wine cup. His gaze swept over the still-flushed faces and bodies of the two youths.

At this moment, the door opened. A gust of wind curled in, and one of the youths kneeling on the floor shivered. A large man was standing at the door, his face masked.

As though he was completely unaware that someone had arrived, the Scorpion did not look up in the man's direction. He reached out to grab a youth's jaw, forcing him to lift his head, and examined his features closely--his looks seemed to be sculpted from jade and refined with powder, a shiny lustre brightening his eyes when he blinked. A pointy chin, and a petite, delicate face--he was born male, but had a feminine visage.

The Scorpion shook his head, and sighed in disappointment. "It's no good. They're too feminine, like rouge stains my hand when I grab them."

The masked man strode in like it was nothing taboo to stay away from. Hearing this, he cast a glance at that quivering pair of youths, and said, "They're but two twinks. Aren't they all this effeminate? What is so unordinary about this?"

The Scorpion waved a hand, and as though they had been relieved of a colossal burden, the two youths bowed, and scrambled out of the room. The Scorpion then slowly poured himself another cup of wine, and said, "It is precisely because it is ordinary that it is meaningless. If these men are like women, why should I whore boys? What a pity...that those two escaped the other time."

The masked man sat down without care, and asked, "Oh? These little pets you keep can escape by themselves?"

The Scorpion looked at him, smiling, and continued slowly, "They aren't mine, but two guests with dishonest intentions--speaking of which, you most probably are acquainted with one of them. Based on his manner, he looks to be a key figure on your side of things."

The masked man froze. He paused, and asked, "Is it...him?"

The Scorpion said, "Who knows?"

The masked man was silent for a long while, then stood, as though he could not stay still any longer. He paced the room with his hands clasped behind his back, murmuring to himself, "He went missing all of a sudden a while ago, and has appeared here, at this moment...he said to capture that Xue Fang and repossess the key, best without attracting the attention of those major clans, but his own movements have become difficult to predict. What does this man mean by this?"

As though it did not concern him, the Scorpion repeated, "Who knows..."

The masked man halted in his tracks abruptly, interrupting the Scorpion with a raised hand. He said, "Let's not talk about this. Have you gotten rid of Sun Ding?"

The Scorpion hummed in agreement, and extended a leg to kick a box out from under the desk, the bottom of it scraping the floor as it slid towards and stopped in front of the masked man. The man lifted the lid of the box with the tip of his shoe. In it was a human head. Despite some decay, the blood-red birthmark over his cheek was still visible. The masked man heaved a sigh of relief, and smiled as he said, "It's good that we've gotten rid of one, the others will be easy to deal with too. Haha, the Delighted Mourning Ghost...while others didn't care when Zhao Jing spread false news about Xue Fang, this fool took the bait, and allowed me to destroy him in one fell swoop."

When the Scorpion had caught the words 'the others will be easy to deal with too', a look--easily missed--flashed in his eyes. He smiled, and said meaningfully, "Yes, there is no need to rush for the others. Problems will be sorted out eventually, one by one."

Abruptly, he set the wine cup down onto the table. His gaze focused, and he said, "Let's jump straight to it--where is the real Xue Fang and your supposed 'key'? Have you collected any clues by now?"

The masked man shook his head, and returned the question, "You neither?"

The Scorpion frowned. "How strange, how odd...this person seems to have evaporated from the living world. Where can he possibly go?"

The masked man was silent for a beat, before he said, "There's no hurry to find him, we'll discuss it further after we get our hands on the Lapis Armour. Zhao Jing is growing more and more ambitious. He seems to be absolutely sure that I'm the one who has hidden the 'key'--I predict that his next move is to shift the blame of the missing Lapis Armour onto the Ghost Valley, follow it with a covert attack, then take the chance to consolidate his power. At present, the pugilist world of the Central

Plains is a mess. No one knows what's going on, and are just following suit, adding fuel to the fire. If they hear him spurring people to action, it is very unlikely that they do not follow his directions. This is him starting with the Ghost Valley in his operation."

The masked man humphed coldly, and said, "I knew that such a day would come, working with Zhao Jing. Nothing much, just that..."

The Scorpion quirked an eyebrow and looked at him. He asked, "What, are you planning to make use of your own Valley Master?"

The masked man laughed. "He's just a madman with tough skin and some ability to fight and kill at most. Now that a moment where he's finally become of use has arrived, let him fight it out with that Zhao Jing. Since he has already arrived in Luoyang and paid you a visit, I'll have to trouble you to 'invite' him, that senior, to carry out some labour."

The Scorpion nodded and said, "Easily done."

At this moment, that group of people, which was the target of this scheming, was still at ease.

That day, Zhang Chengling found Zhou Zishu and told him of his intention to leave with Gu Xiang and the others. Zhou Zishu rolled his eyes at him, and gave him a two-word reply: "Dream on."

Zhang Chengling opened his mouth, and decided to take a leaf out of Wen Kexing's book--pestering him relentlessly, following Zhou Zishu around for a whole day, nattering at him non-stop. Right up till when Zhou Zishu returned to his room at night and was about to slam the door shut, he stuck out a foot, wedged it in between the door and leant his hand against the door frame. Raising his head to stare mulishly at his shifu, he begged, "Shifu, allow me to leave, I can't not do anything, I..."

Zhou Zishu's gaze darkened. He was not a patient person; he had been in a good mood, so he had allowed this little tyke to pester him all day, but anyone would be annoyed by now too. He lifted a foot and kicked at his chest--Zhang Chengling thought that he was testing his martial skills, and flipped backwards merrily, dodging this blow. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Zhou Zishu shut the door on him with a thump.

At some point in time, Wen Kexing had materialised behind Zhang Chengling. Sighing at his beautiful, disrupted fantasies, he said, "Great, there's no way I can enter by the door now."

Zhang Chengling's head drooped. He stood to the side like an eggplant that had been defeated by the frost; Wen Kexing's lamentful tone sounded as though he had

been the cause of Wen Kexing's non-entry. Wen Kexing sighed again, and hinted, "If a man keeps empty chambers, his desires might often go unsated. When his desires go unsated, he might do some irrational things. When he loses his sense of rationality, he might..."

Although Zhang Chengling was a little slow to react, he wasn't stupid. In that instant, he sensed a killing aura rise from Wen Kexing, like a white cloud of vapour billowing from a crate of buns steaming over the fire; frightened, he leapt to his feet and scrambled away, vanishing from Wen Kexing's line of sight.

Wen Kexing watched the figure of him leave, as though he was a little perplexed and did not understand why. Lifting his hand to knock, he braced his other hand on the windowpane, preparing to break in via the window to experience the thrill of a rapist for once.

Unexpectedly, the door opened. Wen Kexing, who was preparing to commit a wicked deed, was stunned. Even when Zhou Zishu turned slightly to let him in, he was still stuck in a not-of-often-seen dumbfounded manner, and said, "You're...letting me in?"

Zhou Zishu cast a glance at him, and cocked an eyebrow. "Not coming in? Forget it, then." Lifting his hand, he moved to close the door, but Wen Kexing hastily pushed his hand aside and wormed his way in, brows spread in joy.

Yet Zhou Zishu lit the candles, without the slightest sign of going to rest for the night. He bent to pour two cups of tea, and sat down by the table. Eyes lowered, he did not appear to have any intention of joking around, but seemed like he had something serious to discuss.

Wen Kexing watched him for a while with a cheeky smile, but slowly, the expression on his face faded. He picked up a teacup, but held it in his hand without drinking from it. Leaning against the backrest of his chair, he stretched out his legs, crossed them, and turned his head to the side to look at Zhou Zishu. He asked, "Why, do you have something to say to me? Have you decided to entrust yourself to me in marriage from now on, or..."

Zhou Zishu broke him off with a short laugh. Raising his gaze to observe him, he said, "Don't you have something to say to me, Valley Master Wen?"

Wen Kexing's words caught in his throat. He opened his mouth, but only shook his head a long moment later. Smiling, he said, "The Great Shaman of Nanjiang is a capable figure. I am very assured if you leave with him."

Dipping the tip of his finger in tea, Zhou Zishu drew senseless patterns on the table surface. "Nothing else?"

Wen Kexing raised his head and watched him. He gazed past the handsome features of the man before him, softened by the light, and was reminded of many things--he felt as though he had known this person for a very, very long time. An emotion had stirred within him the moment he laid eyes on the bones of his back; later on, he had grown to like his identity, and had thought that...so, this was how the leader of Tian Chuang was really like as a person. All of a sudden, the other person felt to him like a kindred soul of his in this world--they were both lone wolves who had been caught in hunters' traps, struggling with all of their lives' might to free themselves to no avail, and thus, were willing to gnaw their own legs off without mercy.

He couldn't help himself from following him, from watching him. Then a revelation dawned on him--he realised, for the first time, that if Zhou Zishu could live like this, was it also a possibility for himself to live like this?

As he pondered, and pondered, the notion consumed him whole, and once it had consumed him, he could not free himself from it. Unconsciously, he reached out and caressed Zhou Zishu's face, his fingers slightly bent and brushing his cheek gently. The coarse skin of a man was cool when it came into contact with his palm, covered with calluses and scars. All of a sudden, he said, "Don't die, will you. If you die, and I live on by myself, won't I be very lonely?"

Zhou Zishu grasped his wrist, but did not throw his hand off. He smiled, and said, "As long as there is a shred of a chance at survival, I cannot die. This life is mine. This martial ability is mine. The heavens granted me this path in life--if they wish to take it away, it won't be that easy."

Wen Kexing could feel his breath on his fingers. Eyes half-lidded, he murmured, almost in a trance, "That year, an owl knocked over the bowl of red water a villager was carrying in his hands..."

Zhou Zishu gazed at him. Expression unchanging, he asked the question he had once asked, "Why was the villager carrying a bowl of red water in his hands?"

Slowly, Wen Kexing started to smile, and said, "Water is colourless, but if human blood lands in it, won't it turn red?"

Zhou Zishu looked at him, and said nothing else. Wen Kexing seemed to suddenly come back to his senses--light came back into his faraway eyes, and they curved up in a smile as he gazed at him and said, "A-Xu, sleep with me once. This way, we'd both keep each other in our hearts. You won't die that easily then, and neither will I. What do you think?"

He said it jokingly, yet Zhou Zishu did not engage, but merely looked at him with an odd gaze. A while later, he finally asked, "Are you truly sincere about this?"

Wen Kexing laughed, his entire frame tilting towards Zhou Zishu. He spoke, nearly brushing Zhou Zishu's lips, "Can't you tell if I am truly sincere or not?"

Stunned, Zhou Zishu paused slightly, and said in a low voice, "I...truly cannot tell. I have not experienced many instances of sincerity over the course of my life, and cannot identify it. Are you?"

Wen Kexing's fingers climbed up his shoulder, and tugged his hair bun loose. Dark hair cascaded down, making the tough man before his eyes look a few degrees more fragile in an instant. He dropped his cheeky grin, and said in a voice very soft, but with momentous certainty, "I am."

Then he closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Zhou Zishu's, casting his heart, affected beyond measure, to the bottommost depths of his decision beyond return, abandoning all further reservations.

Slowly, Zhou Zishu brought his hand up. A long, long while later, it finally came to rest on his shoulder, fingers grasping at the cloth over it.

Out of the blue, a yelp burst in the night. Zhou Zishu's somewhat dazed eyes cleared immediately; Wen Kexing paused in what he was doing, and in that instant when both were distracted, they crashed to the floor together in that suggestive position.

Expressionless, Wen Kexing dropped his gaze, pulled his and Zhou Zishu's open robes back closed, and asked quietly, "At this time...say, should I boil the intruder alive, or braise them with sauce?"

Chapter 66 - Ambush By Night

Standing in the shadows where the moonlight could not reach, the Scorpion was shrouded in a large hooded cape; when the slight breeze made it billow, he looked like a wraith that had quietly coalesced into form in the corner.

He had a beautiful youth on a leash, one of the two who had retreated from his bed earlier. The youth was clothed in form-fitting night gear and had a chain around his neck. The other end of it was held in the Scorpion's hand. He was like a fine-looking dog, rosy of lip and pearly white of teeth.

The Scorpion stretched out his fingers, and gently combed through the youth's hair, sighing, "If we do not come and drop Valley Master Wen a reminder, I am afraid that capable, impressive person will spend the rest of his life in tenderness so sweet that even immortality tempts him not. That is no good--if all heroes are this unambitious, who will unveil that hero's true face?"

The beautiful youth squinted as though he was enjoying it greatly and nuzzled his fingers unconsciously, wanting more caresses. A few dark figures rushed into the small inn. The guests that had been unfortunately embroiled in this situation startled from their dreams, shrieks rising from all around. Suddenly, the door to a room burst open, and a sloppily-dressed, half-grown lad scrambled out from within. A Poisonous Scorpion was in close pursuit behind him.

The Scorpion watched on without interfering. Though the youth looked like a laughable mess, his steps were not the least bit in disarray, and was in fact superb qinggong. He seemed to still be groggy from sleep and had no notion of fighting back, but only scampered around, hiding, crying, "Heck, why is it this bunch of people in black again? You're there when I fall asleep, and still there when I wake! I've not done anything worthy of such a grudge like digging up your ancestors!"

His voice broke on the last sound into a shriek. The Poisonous Scorpion after him had released an oxhair-thin needle. Zhang Chengling pounced face first onto the ground like a dog chowing down on mud, wriggled a few times with his bottom up like an enormous meaty maggot, and then rolled nimbly to the side, leaping to his feet. Scaling the wooden pillar to one side, he twisted, turning back, an object pinched in his hand. Flinging it vehemently at the Poisonous Scorpion behind him, he shouted, "Watch out for my needle!"

That Poisonous Scorpion arched backwards on reflex. From the moment he was born, Zhang Chengling had always been the one scammed, and now he had finally succeeded in scamming someone else under the influence of cheap tricks employed by a series of unscrupulous, shameless people such as Gu Xiang, his shifu, and more--Zhang Chengling was practically overjoyed. He clung to the wooden pillar and scooted upwards like a black bear, even explaining smugly, "Haha, you're too dumb. My shifu taught me to fool others with this."

A miffed voice rang out, "Nonsense, when have I taught you such low and despicable tricks?"

That poor Scorpion--when he had just realised what was going on and was about to give chase, a gust of wind struck him from behind. Before he could turn his head, it rolled off his neck onto the ground. Zhang Chengling's laughter caught in his throat, and he stared dumbly at Wen Kexing, who had materialised out of nowhere.

In that instant, with his vision, all he had been able to catch was a shadow that had sliced through the air. Then that Poisonous Scorpion's head had separated from his body. Wen Kexing stood apathetically to the side, his head lowered. His robes were speckless; only four fingers of his left hand were dripping with blood.

He had no sabre or sword, or any sharp weapon in hand. Yet, he had used some mysterious method to 'slice' the Poisonous Scorpion's head off his neck bare-handed. Could he have possessed the ability to condense the air at his fingertips into the aura of a blade? Wen Kexing's entire demeanour was one of a malicious ghost that clawed its way up from Hell--his expression was not one particularly grave or severe, but it made others could not help but desire to retreat leagues away from him.

Hugging the pillar, Zhang Chengling opened his mouth. No words came out.

By this point, Gu Xiang, Cao Weining and Gao Xiaolian had come out and joined the fight. Leisurely, Zhou Zishu appeared at the door, uncorked the small medicinal bottle the Great Shaman had given him, and, without taking it with any water, dry-swallowed a pill. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, his belt still loosely tied, he did not arm himself with the Baiyi sword. His gaze skipped past Wen Kexing and the others to rest directly on where the Scorpion was standing in the shadows.

The window to the Great Shaman's room had been pushed open sometime ago. The Great Shaman did not jump in the fray, but simply watched by the window. When his gaze landed on Wen Kexing, his brow creased.

Lord Seventh, with a robe spread over his shoulders, asked from behind him, "What do you think of his martial ability?"

The Great Shaman was silent for a moment, and then said, "If it is a matter of true martial ability, at the full peak of his abilities, Manor Lord Zhou may try to have a fair fight with him. However, if they truly exchange blows, he will be unable to score victory over this person."

Pausing slightly, taken aback, Lord Seventh asked, "What about you?"

The Great Shaman shook his head. "Unless I had no other choice, I will never face this person in combat."

Gaze sombre, he looked at Wen Kexing, who was standing in the middle of the courtyard--Wen Kexing seemed to have smiled slightly, raised his hand, and then lapped at his four fingers, still dripping with human blood, once. It left a crimson bloodstain on his lips.

Be it the Great Shaman himself or Zhou Zishu, while they might have been experts of whose calibre were rare in the jianghu, their martial skills were imparted by a master, and then--according to how someone else had taught them--slowly figured out on their own, whetted and polished through toil.

Although one's cultivation depended on their character and choices, they were ultimately guided on the basics by a master. For all, their motivation to master martial arts was to become capable, to fulfill their own aspirations; even though others couldn't tell, there was an undeniable, unshakable craftsmanship to their martial arts, but this person was different.

This person's martial abilities were polished by decades of life-or-death instances in the tempests of bloody massacres--he had no mantras, no fixed set of moves, but only a choice to either live, or die, time after time.

This was very likely the most frightening sort of martial arts in the world.

The Scorpion opened his mouth slightly. There was an unexpected tremor to his voice; in what could have been fear or excitement, his fingers tightened, hurting the beautiful youth in his grip. The youth's features scrunched a little in an expression of pain, but he did not dare to struggle. He heard the Scorpion murmur, "If they now claim that he is not the Master of the Ghost Valley, I won't believe it with my life."

Abruptly, he let go of the youth he was leading in hand, patted the back of his head, and said, "Go meet that kid with unbelievable luck. Go play with him for a bit, us adults will have a chat."

The youth flitted out on command. Surprisingly, his martial abilities were rather strong.

At the same time, the Scorpion put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. Upon the command, all surviving Poisonous Scorpions leapt out of the battle area, and formed tidy ranks by his side.

The Scorpion walked out of the dark to stand before Wen Kexing, and saluted him with palm over fist. "Gentlemen, we meet again."

Wen Kexing loosened his grip, and the corpse of a Poisonous Scorpion hit the ground. He cast an eye over the Scorpion, killing intent teeming as he asked in extreme annoyance, "Have you come seeking death?"

The beautiful youth that the Scorpion brought along had already swept towards Zhang Chengling. Apathetic, the Scorpion did not spare him another glance, but it was in fact Zhou Zishu, who had not budged an inch off to one side, who raised his head to look at the two youths engaged in duel. He seemed to shift a little, then hesitated, and ultimately did not interfere--that beautiful youth's attacks were vicious, and were forcing Zhang Chengling to scramble in panic and evade at once.

However, Zhou Zishu could tell that if the martial abilities of these two were to be called bad, they were not too atrocious. He already knew that Zhang Chengling was the sort of person who would make progress upon being pushed to the brink of despair; anyway, with so many people around, he was not afraid that there would be any mishaps with the little tyke, and let them be.

The Scorpion smiled and said, "I dare not, I dare not. This humble one still treasures his life greatly. Since our target has been given the Valley Master's protection, even if we possess the courage of beasts, we dare not tempt fate."¹⁸⁶

Wen Kexing looked at him, annoyed, as though he was about to rip the Scorpion's head off if he continued to speak nonsense.

The Scorpion continued, "I have come forth for reason no more than I was tasked by someone to pass a message to this Young Master Zhang."

Wen Kexing raised his head to glance at those two youths, who were already causing a ruckus. Too lazy to bother with him, he walked back with a very foul expression. When he came to Zhou Zishu's side, he dropped his gaze and rescinded his nasty comportment, before finally asking quietly, "Have you taken the medication?"

Zhou Zishu made an offhanded noise of acknowledgement, and asked the Scorpion, "What message?"

The Scorpion stood with his hands clasped behind his back, and raised his head to look at Zhang Chengling, who was still hiding and ducking earlier, but was now able to return a few blows despite his flustered manner, and could not help a noise of curiosity. This youth had produced a sword that seemed like scrap metal at some earlier point in time; one could tell upon first glance that it had been flippantly obtained for practice. His moves, which looked to have no order to them, seemed to conceal two exceptional sword forms. One was serene and proper, full of the noble aura of a nation's finest, peerless talent, and the other nimble and charmingly

¹⁸⁶ 太岁头上动土(lit. "breaking ground above Tai Sui"): Folk legend has it that if you break ground beneath where the celestial object Tai Sui hangs, you'll discover a meat-like object that is a physical manifestation of Tai Sui--it's a vicious omen and can draw tragedy to you.

unbridled--if it were wielded to its fullest extent, it would have been as pleasant to the eye as drifting clouds and running brooks.

The two sword forms were awkwardly stitched together in a clumsy and recklessly blunt manner by the youth; it was as odd as it looked, but there was an uncanny harmony to it.

The Scorpion could tell, too, that within ten moves, the seemingly-ferocious attacks of the child he reared would be neutralised, and sighed, "A reputed master will produce a fine disciple, after all."

Abruptly, he raised his voice, and said loudly, "Young Master Zhang, do you want to know who the true culprit behind the deaths of your family is?"

Hearing this, Zhang Chengling was momentarily shaken. Once distracted, the chain around his opponent's neck hurtled at him, and tangled with the sword in his hand. The sword was not any impressive weapon in the first place; it instantly snapped into two. Immediately taking advantage of his upper hand, the beautiful youth in pursuit lifted the dark sabre-staff in his hand, and swung it at Zhang Chengling's waist.

Under duress, Zhang Chengling tumbled to the side. Out of solutions, he raised his leg and kicked at the youth's crotch. The youth was surprised and enraged, but could only turn sideways to dodge it.

All those present could not help the odd expressions on their faces.

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing exchanged a glance, and said at the same time, with the same this-has-nothing-to-do-with me attitude, "What sort of disciple have you produced?"

Wen Kexing glared, and said, "He is clearly your disciple."

Zhou Zishu said as though he was in the right, "Bullshit, how can I possibly produce such a disciple who doesn't know anything apart from cheap, despicable tricks? He is clearly of your sort."

Zhang Chengling leapt up, treading the Nine Palaces Formation at full steam, letting that beautiful youth chase him along the walls. He heard the Scorpion continue with a smile, after his bout of surprise, "What a child, refusing to be confined to a particular form--I'll be honest, the one who killed your father, the one who caused the death of the Taishan Sect Leader, the one who assassinated the clan leader of the Shen clan, the one who shifted the blame and bounty to Hero Gao, are all one person.

Zhang Chengling asked loudly, "Who is it?"

The Scorpion asked in reply, “Who do you think it is? At present, who can possess the Lapis Armour in unscrupulous secrecy, while righteously summoning all the heroes under the sky to surround the Ghost Valley, and eliminate all witnesses before bringing the Ghost Valley’s ‘key’ and the Lapis Armour together?”

Zhou Zishu let out an “ah”, looked at Wen Kexing, and said meaningfully, “The Ghost Valley’s key--no wonder...what Long Que had said was new to all of us, but only the Valley Master was calm and not the slightest bit astonished.”

Wen Kexing said, “You’re not surprised.”

Zhou Zishu smiled and said, “I have nothing to be surprised about--the Ghost Valley has been dormant for many years. Why would a traitor surface out of the blue, and set his sights on the Lapis Armour? He’s taking such a big risk; if he is trying to trap a prized predator without bait, that is far too abnormal.”

Wen Kexing hesitated for a long moment, then explained in low tones, “Indeed, the ten abominable Ghosts of the Valley are locked in an unending struggle, with Sun Ding and Xue Fang in the lead. Before this, the Delighted Mourning Ghost used some unknown method to sway the allegiances of most Ghosts towards himself, employing the power of the masses to suppress the weak. In the Valley, the party that does not have the might that others possess must die, so Xue Fang took the risky path...or, he had been planning such a day since a long time ago, to steal the ‘key’.”

Zhou Zishu nodded, and said, dragging out the words, “Oh, ‘some unknown method--’”

Of the five major clans those years ago, there was only one person left. Even if Zhang Chengling was dumber than he was now, he could understand who the person the Scorpion’s words were hinting at. In that instant, his heart stopped beating, and he roared, “You’re speaking nonsense! That’s impossible!”

Zhou Zishu raised his head and said calmly, “Little tyke, a strong will is indispensable if one wants to become someone great. You do not have to pull the wool over your own eyes about a matter that you have already seen the truth of--of course, if you think he’s spouting bullshit, you can also let it pass out of your other ear.”

As he spoke, his figure flashed briefly, although he did not seem to have moved, and appeared by Cao Weining’s side. Smoothly plucking Cao Weining’s sword from him, he stretched out his arm and threw it upwards, and said, “Catch. Don’t you want to leave with Gu Xiang and the rest? If you can kill that pale-faced female impersonator, I’ll let you leave.”

Flitting over, Zhang Chengling caught Cao Weining's sword. With a clang, the long sword was drawn out of the sheath, and with a loud shout, he hesitated no longer, swinging it at the beautiful youth.

He was practically treating Cao Weining's sword like the Golden-Thread Ringed Sabre; in that instant, his strokes were astonishingly of boundless, volatile power, an intense, surging storm that bore down hard--no one had taught him this.

Shocked, that beautiful youth panicked, his attacks thrown into disarray, and stepped backwards reflexively--he, in fact, had a limp to one foot that was not usually evident, but became obvious when he beat a hasty retreat at this time. A cryptic smile suddenly surfaced on the Scorpion's face. Naturally, Zhang Chengling had noticed his limp too; gaze sharpening abruptly, a vicious hatred twisting his features, he brought the sword straight down.

He sliced that youth from face to chest.

The splattered blood drenched his face.

Zhang Chengling turned his head, looked right at the Scorpion, and said, "You are saying that it's Uncle Zhao."

The killers from the Poisonous Scorpions had only started to appear when Zhao Jing had brought him to Dongting--why had Zhao Jing let Zhou Zishu, of unknown background, take him away so easily back then?

Because the best moment to deliver the killing blow was when Zhang Chengling was not by his side.

All the witnesses of yesteryear had died; today, only Zhao Jing, who had gotten injured for the sake of the orthodox, was left. At present, he was highly respected and regarded, reputed like no other--

This was none other than the truth.

Chapter 67 - The Parting of the Ways

That beautiful youth was not dead--after all, Zhang Chengling had never harmed someone before. Although his execution was ruthless, he had hesitated for a moment, and left but a very long and deep gash on his opponent, which blood was gurgling out of.

The Scorpion looked at Zhang Chengling. Bizarrely, he laughed, and murmured, "There are just some people with such great luck in this world. Good child, your potential is immeasurable."

He bent, leaning down to observe the beautiful youth on the ground. Body spasming, the youth looked at the Scorpion, the desire to struggle for life surfacing on his face. The Scorpion grabbed his chin gently, and shook his head. "A pity that the face is marred."

Then, his hand tightened, and the youth's neck crooked at an unnatural angle. He had strangled him dead.

The Scorpion did not even spare his corpse a glance. Nodding to the few of them, he turned and left, bringing his Poisonous Scorpions with him.

Zhang Chengling gripped the bloodied sword in hand and stood alone by himself in the courtyard. He seemed to be shaking all over.

Cao Weining walked over to him cautiously, plucked his own sword from Zhang Chengling's hand, and cleaned it. He glanced at the body of the youth on the ground in lingering apprehensiveness, then patted Zhang Chengling's shoulder and said, "This...we're all rather surprised by this, actually. He doesn't look like a good man to me--what he said might not be true."

He looked up, as though looking for assistance, but saw Gao Xiaolian frozen in shock, Gu Xiang deep in thought, and the other two...clearly as though they long had this outcome in mind.

Cao Weining thought back to Zhou Zishu's reply to Wen Kexing's question, that day when Gao Xiaolian had recounted her encounters. "Almost all those who know what happened have died, leaving only that one person. The victors and the losers are evident."

The victors and the losers...were evident? He could not help a discreet shiver--so they had already figured it out at the time, so they had...

Abruptly, Zhang Chengling raised his head, and said to Zhou Zishu, "Shifu, I remember that person who dressed in all black and forced answers out of my father. Just now, I...I..."

He turned his head, his gaze falling on the youth's body. His throat bobbed, but he trembled even more furiously. He lifted his hand, tiptoed slightly, and said, "He was...about this tall, had very broad shoulders, one of his legs...one of his legs, it wasn't easily spotted, but when he was chasing me, he walked too fast; he had a limp, like him--it's that person, who injured Uncle Li grievously, he...he..."

"Ah," Gu Xiang exclaimed softly, a hand over her mouth. Her already-wide eyes were about to pop out of their sockets, as though she had heard the scariest news in this world.

Wen Kexing took one look at her. Impassively raising a hand that did not have human blood on it, he caressed Zhang Chengling's head, nodded, and said without much emotion, "I know."

He raised his head. His gaze seemed to pierce through the night, looking towards someplace very far away; strangely, a smile surfaced on his face, as though he was a weary traveller who had finally gotten a glimpse of fate's true face after traversing leagues and leagues, over great mountains and across broad rivers. There was a subtle hint of mockery, but more of it was relief and tranquility that could not be put into words.

Gu Xiang lowered her hand slowly, and said in a soft voice, "Master..."

Immediately, Wen Kexing lifted his hand to stop her, and said, "You are a maiden that has been married off--like water that has been thrown out of the door. From now on, this matter has nothing to do with you. Tomorrow, you shall go and find Ye Baiyi, as you are supposed to do. Of course, I won't withhold your dowry. Don't go back there."

Zhang Chengling wanted to be stronger, however he could; he had just decided to stand tall like a real man to protect the people he should be protecting, and exterminate the people he should be exterminating; no matter what he encountered, he would never retreat, and never fear. But it was as if his tears would not stop, landing one drop after another--he found himself cowardly, but also felt as though he had turned back into that weak, helpless child who could not accomplish anything.

Villains had killed his family; he wanted to properly learn martial arts to become stronger, so that he could protect his kin and friends from further harm in the future; or even kill villains, to avenge those who had died.

But that was Uncle Zhao...

He was the person who his own father, before he closed his eyes for good, had tugged at Uncle Li's hand and made Uncle Li promise that he would entrust him to;

he was that person who, in that dilapidated temple in the wild that cold night, Uncle Li had gripped shifu tightly and instructed to entrust him to.

He was that person who had stayed by his side day and night in those darkest times. He was that person who, with reddened eyes, proclaimed in front of all the heroes under the sky to aid Zhang Chengling in obtaining justice for his family. He was...

The ways of this world were too arduous, and human nature too complex. If he could not even trust those closest to him, those he found most reliable, what else could make a person entrust themselves to someone entirely?

Wen Kexing sighed faintly. Looking away from the crowd, he turned around and returned to his room. However, Zhou Zishu paused, beckoned at Zhang Chengling and said, "Little tyke, come over here."

Zhang Chengling scrubbed hard at his eyes, but very quickly, his vision blurred again. He knew that Zhou Zishu was most annoyed by his crying, and he choked, "Shi, shifu, I don't mean to cry, I just...I just...I'll be fine in a while..."

Zhou Zishu exhaled. Unlike usual, he did not say anything, but reached out to pull Zhang Chengling into his embrace. Zhou Zishu had only casually draped an outer robe over his inner robe; dressed extremely thinly, his warmth easily seeped out through his clothes. Zhang Chengling buried his face into Zhou Zishu's chest, and in that instant, felt as though he was sheltering against a mountain that would never crumble.

Sworn ties between the great houses were no more than lies and treachery, and yet, strangers who met by chance could survive by leaning on each other.

Cao Weining tugged at Gu Xiang, and they left quietly. Gao Xiaolian took a deep breath, and returned to her room too, deeply troubled. Only the master and disciple were left in the courtyard; through the window, the Great Shaman gazed at them, and couldn't help but ask softly, "Is that...Manor Lord Zhou? Since when was he this..."

Lord Seventh chuckled gently. In a murmur, as a reply or to himself, he said, "Was he not always like this? Back then, he was the same to Jiuxiao. Although he always behaved like a strict father or older brother on the surface, he planned everything and made arrangements for Jiuxiao in secret. A pity, how that person did not appreciate his effort."

The Great Shaman looked back at him. The room was not lit; mostly hidden in the shadows, with only the moonlight illuminating a small quarter of his face, Lord Seventh was ethereally beautiful. He said, "If you say that he is a great humanitarian of good virtue and etiquette, he may not dare to acknowledge it. If you say that he isn't a good person, however...he has done those deeds that the heavens would strike

him down for, but not one of them was committed out of selfish desires for his own ends.”

Abruptly, he turned around, snatched something up, and walked out, sighing almost imperceptibly.

Lord Seventh strode into the courtyard, and tossed the object in his hand into Zhang Chengling’s arms. It was a sword of black iron; Zhang Chengling scrambled to catch it. He froze, dumbfounded, then slowly unsheathed it when Zhou Zishu nodded.

That sword was extraordinarily wide, even twice the width of Cao Weining’s. There was no glint to be seen, but it had an ancient, primitive air to it. Shining with a dull light, the blade was mantled with the dense miasma of carnage. When held in the hand, it had a solid, abundant heft, and was about two to three times heavier than an ordinary sword.

There were two words carved along the fuller: Great Famine.

Lord Seventh said, “My subordinates gifted me this to fiddle around with. It is rather magnificent, but I am a poor student--it is useless if I hold on to it. It is cumbersome to wield too, as it is too dense. You can have it.”

Zhang Chengling went “ah”, his eyes red-rimmed, a little at a loss on what to do.

Lord Seventh said, “A marvellous sword should be given to a hero, even if he will only become a hero in the future. There is no hope for me, who'll be nothing more than a wealthy loafer in this life. Take it, and do your best not to let it down.”

Zhou Zishu said seriously, “Our gratitude to Lord Seventh.”

Lord Seventh laughed lightly, slanting a gaze at him, and said meaningfully, “Our friendship has lasted some years now--we’ve fought together, gambled with our lives together. You joke and play around with others like that, but why do you become so serious and boring once you turn to me?”

Zhou Zishu paused, taken aback.

Lord Seventh flapped his hand, turned around and walked back to his room, saying, “Zishu, I am no longer the Nanning Lord, and you are no longer Lord Zhou. With your intelligence, have you, astonishingly, not figured it out?”

Zhou Zishu was silent for a moment. Then a smidgen of relief suddenly flashed across his face. Laughing aloud, he said to Lord Seventh, “Of course I do not dare joke around. Lord Seventh has such beautiful features, I’m afraid that my jar of vinegar at home will crack.”

Lord Seventh halted in his tracks, but he was not angry. He merely glanced back at him, torn between hilarity and awkwardness, shook his head in resignation, and entered the room.

Zhou Zishu did not sleep for the whole night. He taught Zhang Chengling a set of sword techniques in the courtyard, and the youth watched attentively with swollen eyes. He was still slow to learn; he had to watch a move that any other person would learn by seeing it once demonstrated a few times and ask about every aspect of it until he understood it completely, before they could move on to the next.

Afterwards, he took out brush and paper, and drew every move that Zhou Zishu had taught on the paper. On the side, he noted down the mantra and took messy notes, as though he wished to jot down every word that Zhou Zishu had said.

Zhou Zishu asked, "What are you drawing this for? Won't it do to just practice when you go back?"

Red-faced, Zhang Chengling mumbled, "Shifu, I haven't familiarised myself with the ones you taught me the last time, I...I know I'm stupid, so I set a rule for myself. I have to practice each move ten thousand times, before I start practicing the next one, and I'll revise it every now and then. Every morning, I'll get up early to recite...recite..."

Recalling that Zhou Zishu did not like his constant recitation of the mantras, he halted and spoke no more. Carefully, he lifted his head to peek at Zhou Zishu, and stuck out his tongue sheepishly.

Zhou Zishu looked at him with a complex gaze. Wisdom hidden underneath a fool's skin, quickness concealed within clumsy limbs; unhurried and patient, every step honest and true--the Scorpion had said that Zhang Chengling was lucky, but all of a sudden, he felt that he was the luckier one, who had received the cream of the crop for a student.

So he patted him on the shoulder, and said, "You can leave tomorrow. Do what you can manage, and don't...be undeserving of the sword that Lord Seventh gave you."

The next day, the four of them--Gu Xiang, Cao Weining, Gao Xiaolian, and Zhang Chengling--set off on their journey. They were looking for Ye Baiyi, but at the same time, Cao Weining was worried about Qingfeng Sword Sect. Gao Xiaolian and Zhang Chengling also desired to uncover the truth, and decided to covertly hunt for the tracks of Zhao Jing and the others. Gao Chong had been one of the holders of the Realm's Command; Ye Baiyi would not stand aside when he had run afoul of tragedy, and they might come across him.

Just as he had seen these four most raucous ones off and was planning to return to his room to rest, Zhou Zishu pushed the door open and saw Wen Kexing waiting for him in his room. Wen Kexing was sitting on the windowsill, one leg dangling outside, the other curled up, his fingers interlaced and resting on his knee. Noticing that Zhou Zishu had entered, he lifted his head and smiled.

Then he said, "A-Xu, I'm leaving too."

Zhou Zishu paused, and asked, "Back to Fengya Mountain?"

Wen Kexing nodded. "I've come out to roam for long enough--I've met almost all the people and seen almost all the sights that I've never encountered in my life before. It's time for me to return and finish up my business. A-Xu..."

He seemed as though he had something to say, but did not know where to begin. All he could do was to grab at his own hair, and then blurt, "You... recuperate properly, and you're not allowed to cheat on me. I'll go look for you on Changming Mountain, if..."

Zhou Zishu took out his flask, swung it in his hand, and poured himself a cup of wine. He did not look at him, and did nothing more than interrupt, "Got it. Get lost, and don't die."

Wen Kexing smiled soundlessly, and left him two words: "Take care". The next moment, he was no longer there, leaving an empty windowsill cooled by the breeze, as though there had never been a person sitting there in the first place.

Zhou Zishu downed the cup of wine in one go.

Chapter 68 - Letting Go

After walking for a stretch of time, Cao Weining realized that Gu Xiang was being quiet. She had been, ever since that scene of turmoil from the start of the night.

Gao Xiaolian, a reserved young woman, was not especially familiar with them, and was just fine with not speaking on her own initiative, merely following behind them distantly while she carefully helped Zhang Chengling with leading the reins; the little guy was holding his new Great Famine sword in his arms while dozing off on the horse's back. His drool was flowing onto its neck, dampening its hair and causing the little horse to shake its head the whole time.

Cao Weining gathered in close to Gu Xiang, leaned down, then tilted his head to take a careful measure of her expression. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Did you not sleep well, either?"

She looked at him listlessly, then lowered her head, the spitting image of a young wife. That only frightened him, though. Believing that she had eaten something spoiled, he quickly reached out to feel her forehead, thinking to himself, This woman that always jumps around and all about is being very docile... she couldn't have fallen ill, right?

She leaned backwards, flung his hand away, then turned to look back at the pair that was a good bit away from them. "It's a... you've always thought that honesty was a bit foolish, and normally, three kicks wouldn't get one fart out of you. What anyone else said would just be whatever," she said, sullen. "How did someone that's apparently never grown a brain end up turning into a major devil that plots behind everyone's backs?"

He chewed on her words a couple of times, then made a weird face. "Ah-Xiang, have you... misunderstood something about Xiao Zhang?"

Gu Xiang went mute for a short moment. "You who is surnamed Cao," she started, sinister, "can go ahead and die."

She then raised her hand and went to hit him.

Cao Weining smiled mischievously as he dodged her. "Ah, don't. Won't you be a widow if I die? To be widowed at a young age would be very pitiful."

After thinking about that, she felt it to be true; she still didn't yet hold the two-and-half streets of dowry her Master had promised, so doing this would be a loss. Glaring at Cao Weining, she took her raised hand back, deciding to fight with language, not fists.

She knew herself to not be any sort of highly capable. Many times, she couldn't understand what her Master was saying, simply following beside him in ignorance, occasionally flapping her trap to entertain him in addition to her everyday life of attending to him. She, and he... and they... were not people going the same path. She couldn't be considered a flower of considerate words, nor a close confidante of rosy cheeks.

Like a child, she had only a smidgen of deviousness and cunning, where she could approach benefits whilst shunning disadvantages. Even though all the people she had seen below Fengya Mountain had been nothing good, her Master had been there, and none of them had ever gotten the idea to dare strike her. Thus, extraordinarily uncommonly, she was able to preserve her naïveté; she wasn't that great at fathoming peoples' intentions, and in spite of knowing what evil was, she had no idea what genuine evil looked like.

Lao Meng, the Ghost of Impermanence, had been wearing old-farmer-esque clothes at Lake Tai when she had temporarily nabbed him. He had dug a hole in the ground to drag those two sorry-looking men out of it, and then, because of one word from their Master, specifically sought out the clothes of a butcher to wear, smiling happily at everyone. She had even heard people talking behind his back, saying that he was a dog raised by their Master.

Even dogs would have a bit of a dog's temper, but he didn't even have one of those.

Did he steal the key? Did he betray Ghost Valley? Where was the Hanged Ghost, Xue Fang?

There had been a fake Xue Fang, back when the Zhang family had been silenced. Was Lao Meng the impersonator? Starting from that point on, had Lao Meng been colluding with that Zhao guy?

Noticing that her brows were still furrowed, Cao Weining attempted to ease her worries. "Truthfully... I understood a bit of what Brother Zhou and the rest had said yesterday."

Blinking her big, apricot pit-like eyes, she looked up at him. Once glanced at like that by her, he practically emanated a heroic aura, like he could do anything, and suddenly felt himself to truly be a purely manly man.

A purely manly man who, for the sake of cajoling his lady when she was upset, would suffer her blows whenever she was angry, and stand up to give her a thorough analysis whenever she didn't understand something.

"I heard them say 'Lapis Armor' and 'key'," he said. "They evidently want to get what's in the Armor. Finding the five pieces of it alone isn't enough, as it still requires

a key, which is in the hands of that limping villain Xiao Zhang had spoken of. At the start, this villain and Zhao Jing were in the same group, so they set out together to do evil and steal the other pieces. Zhao Jing murdered Patriarch Shen, framed Hero Gao for it, then obtained all of them; now, one has the Armor, while one has the key, thus dividing the loot unequally, and making them start to fight.”

Gu Xiang pondered this, then nodded. “That seems to be so... who the one wanting to kill Zhang Chengling, then?”

“Think about it. Xiao Zhang saw the crook that’s been hiding all this time. Even if he had forgotten it for a time, that crook still feared that he would remember, then unveil his identity, so he hired people to hunt him down... ah, yes, Zhao Jing must have known about this, else he wouldn’t have allowed Brother Zhou and them to bring Xiao Zhang away amidst such a mess. Once he was brought away, he then wouldn’t be able to set about killing him so easily — but why is that Ghost Valley crook afraid of having his identity exposed? It took me half a night of thinking before I understood; he’s likely scared of the Valley’s internals discovering that he’s a traitor, then killing him.”

She looked at him in adoration, thinking to herself that his theory was like a blind cat bumping into a dead mouse.

Upon seeing her expression, he felt even more like he was walking on air, waving his hand in false humility. “I’m just randomly guessing, that’s all. Ahem. Let’s not worry over stuff like fools; we’ll go expose Zhao Jing’s plot, look for Hero Ye, then go back to live a good life, just you and me.”

“Your shifu disdains that I have no father or mother, and am a wild girl,” she pointed out. “What if he doesn’t allow it?”

Cao Weining made another big hand wave. “Then you’ll abduct me, and we’ll elope.”

“Pah! Am I that ravenous?” she fumed.

He thought some more. “Then I’ll pretend to switch roles to a flower-stealer, abduct you, and we’ll elope.”

Upon deliberation, she believed that that was a terrible idea, but also just good enough. She thus nodded, satisfied, and reached out her tiny hand to hook around Cao Weining’s. They rode side-by-side, which was simply sickeningly sweet.

In full contentment, he thought, So, this is what it is to have a wife... having one is really nice. She’s soft, smells good, and when she leans against me, even my heart melts after her. She smiles at me, and I immediately get dizzy. She’s someone who will know when I’m feeling hot or cold, or will make up the bed... in the future, we’ll

build a little house with a little courtyard, have a couple chubby little kids, and I'll hear her voice sharply calling for me to come home for dinner...

The more he thought, the more beautiful those thoughts became, until his desire to spout poetry was overwhelming. "Golden wind and jadeite dew meet once, superior to the countless meetings of the mortal realm," he crisply recited. "In the Heavens, I wish for us to be birds of the same feather. On Earth, I wish for us to be conjoined trees..."¹⁸⁷

Those people scheming this and scheming that the day long, struggling to make others die while living themselves; what was the point of it? Practicing exceptional, divine arts, being number one in the realm through a thousand autumns and innumerable generations; what was the point of that?

They would still be old bachelors all their lives, never getting wives.

Cao Weining vaguely felt them to all be a bit pitiful.

When Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman returned carrying a bunch of medical supplies, they caught sight of Zhou Zishu sitting in the courtyard, whittling a flute. His craftsmanship was nothing great, and he was using materials from his surroundings, even having ruined a few prior, all sounds they made muted when played and producing a field's worth of wood dust. As Lord Seventh drew near, he discovered that his latest flute had since taken shape.

The Great Shaman nodded at Zhou Zishu, then turned and went in the house, not having anything to say to him.

Lord Seventh conversely sat down at the side. "What are you doing?"

"Cultivating myself physically and spiritually," Zhou Zishu answered lazily. He put his carved flute up to his mouth, then blew, finally getting it to make sound... when others played the flute, it was a heavenly sound that entered the clouds, but when he played it, it was a demonic noise that pierced the ears, sometimes shrill, sometimes hoarse, and not a single note in-tune regardless, crowing and twittering. This was clearly not self-cultivation — it was a cultivation of any listeners' endurance.

Covering his ears, Lord Seventh took the carving knife and wood piece out of his hands. His fingers were extraordinarily nimble; in just a few motions, the flute was fully shaped. It didn't look any different from Zhou Zishu's craft at a surface glance,

¹⁸⁷ First half is from Immortal at the Magpie Bridge by Qin Guan (<https://www.echineselearning.com/blog/que-qiao-xian-a-love-poem-about-qi-xi>), second half is from Dream of the Red Chamber (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream_of_the_Red_Chamber) by Cao Xueqin.

but after the latter took it back, brought it to his lips, and then tested it out, the change was audible. He played out a folk ditty from the wildlands, which was actually quite nice.

At the end of it, he put the flute down with a smile. “You’re worthy of having been the number one capital dandy that could pick up and put down anything, from poetry, to songs, to dining, drinking, hustling, and gambling. All that playing around gained you a couple of tricks.”

Lord Seventh grinned. “He left?”

The other nodded.

“You didn’t go with?”

“I wanted to, of course, but there’s too much of a mess on their end. One praying mantis is hunting a cicada while having a hundred siskins behind it. I’ll wait a little, then go take an assessment. I’ll go fish him up when the time is right.”

“You’ll only fish him up? Nothing else?” Lord Seventh gave him a look. “If he was Jiuxiao, you wouldn’t be so unworried.”

Zhou Zishu smiled, shaking his head. “How could he be compared to Jiuxiao? He was just a kid, while he... knows what he needs to do. I can’t meddle in his affairs, either. He has to solve them by himself.”

As he talked, he stood up to stretch out his muscles. Sticking the short flute Lord Seventh had carved and his hip flask both into his belt, he turned away. “Thanks a bunch for the flute — if I haven’t guessed wrong, that Scorpion is the first siskin. I’ll go out, grab a flower-engraved pot, and get ready to take flight with him.”

Lord Seventh lifted his head to look at him. Zhou Zishu’s back was against the light; the look on his face was unclear, yet his cheeks appeared to be bordered with gold. “Go quick and come back quick,” he thus said with a smile. “Don’t neglect your healing time.”

Zhou Zishu waved, then strode out.

The other lowered his head, whittled out another little flute, blew the sawdust away, then put it up to his lips, as if to send him off.

That clear, rich sound echoed like the rousing tone of the wind, its trailing notes gently roiling. Despite this being no more than a crude flute made of weeds, it allowed him to play like the natural grace of a seeming flourishing age, as well as its splendid noise, was coming.

What a shame that before the song's end, the flute petered out, and Zhou Zishu's figure had long since vanished.

Lord Seventh lowered his eyes, chuckled, and tossed the flute to the side. Standing and gathering up his sleeves, he then turned to head inside.

Long ago, when Zhou Zishu and he had still been in the capital, when he was still that Prince Nan'ning who would get a hundred answers for his every call, and when Zhou Zishu was still the head of Tian Chuang that warped and weaved in the dark, he had believed that the two of them were the same type of person.

Yet, coming to this day, he realized that they weren't the same at all. He had never had the man's same kind of jianghu spirit, where one rolled with the punches. He had never been this open-minded before. Seeing Zhou Zishu live so honestly... actually made him faintly jealous.

Zhou Zishu stayed on a flower lane roof for two days, completely downing about ten jars of wine, after which he finally managed to wait until the Scorpion brought out his entire flock of Poisonous Scorpions.

Sure enough, bitches had no hearts. That lame-legged evil Ghost, who had tried to kill Zhang Chengling, had likely called for him to go gang up on Wen Kexing, then come back to deal with Zhao Jing. He had also deliberately made a lame-legged youth provoke Zhang Chengling, as if he was afraid that the boy wouldn't remember, or that Wen Kexing didn't know who was behind the Long-Tongued Ghost.

Both sides were collecting money and selling out, and after that, they still intended to take advantage of the devastation after their fierce battle to cook these people all together in one pot. It was really quite shrewd.

Zhou Zishu was not in a rush. Extracting a human-skin mask from his lapels, his handsome visage was gone without a trace via one swipe of his hand. He mixed into the crowd, tailing after them from a moderate distance.

Following three-ish days of following, he noticed that they weren't going straight for Fengya Mountain, seeming to have actively taken a detour in the middle, as if they were specifically going to handle some kind of nuisance. Very quickly, he came to learn that this 'nuisance' was actually Yu Qiufeng.

The man had previously exploited the Green Vixen in order to flee calamity, but he had no such good luck this time around. He was face with a team of Poisonous Scorpions that was chasing him like cats hunting a mouse, and all he could do was desperately scramble away, currently even more overwrought than Zhang Chengling. Now, he had no one protecting him — there used to be a woman who might have done so, but she was dead.

He wore only rags, looking way more like a beggar than Zhou Zishu had when first entering jianghu. Where was even an iota of Sect Leader Yu, who had grasped a lightly-dancing fan?

The Huashan Sect had since re-established its Leader, and no longer acknowledged him. He had become akin to a stray dog.

Eventually, Yu Qiufeng's route of escape reached its end, and he was captured alive before the Scorpion.

Chapter 69 - Returning

The Scorpion used his toes to lift his chin, beginning to laugh. “Ooo, it’s Sect Leader Yu.”

Yu Qiufeng shook all over. His eyes were dull, as if somewhat delirious. Struggling hard to raise his head, he looked at the Scorpion. “I... I’m not... not in my pl... not in my...” he uttered, stopping and starting.

The other shook his head, leaned in close, and spoke right into his ear. “That night, outside of Lake Tai’s Zhao Manor, there were actually three total people that had died. One was Mu Yunge, Duanjian Manor’s owner. One was Yu Tianjie, your precious son. There’s one more... that none of you knew, as he died in a cave. He was the Long-Tongued Ghost of Ghost Valley. Do you want to hear about what happened with that, Sect Leader Yu?”

Once he brought up the name ‘Yu Tianjie’, Yu Qiufeng resembled a quickly-dying fish placed out of the water, twitching all over. The whites of his eyes were about to bulge out as he stared dead at the Scorpion.

“You had all long known about the Lapis Armor’s existence before you went to Dongting, so you had your dear son wait at Lake Tai to intently watch the Zhang brat, and also take the chance to lie in wait for the Armor. Unexpectedly... Mu Yunge, that nervous wreck, coincidentally discovered that the Zhao’s had a piece, and used the night to steal it. Yu Tianjie had believed himself to have been the only one watching him, but in reality... there were two others doing so that night, as well.”

Yu Qiufeng seemed to understand something, but also understand nothing. He felt that this was all getting absurd. It seemed like there was an unseen hand holding a plan in the dark, and each and every of them was just an endlessly struggling pawn on an immense qi board.

“One was the Delighted Mourning Ghost. The reason why he hadn’t the time to take the Armor was because he sensed the presence of someone else, someone he couldn’t provoke at the time — the Ghost of Impermanence that represented the Ghost Valley’s Master, Meng Hui. Unluckily... he’s also another client of mine. Your son, believing himself to be clever, stupidly took the Armor off of Mu Yunge, and then, right as he excitedly thought to leave, Lao Meng had someone kill him. That someone had once been subordinated to Xue Fang, a general that later changed sides in Ghost Valley’s internal strife — the Long-Tongued Ghost.”

The Scorpion paused. Tears evenly flowed down Yu Qiufeng’s windworn face, as did various unknown fluids, making him look both revolting and pitiful.

“What’s even more unlucky is that the remarkable Ghost Master was meeting with his little paramour when the moon was above the branches of willows, so Lao Meng

was too afraid to show his face. The traitorous Long-Tongued Ghost used his old Master's stunt to kill Yu Tianjie, then shift the blame for it, wanting to deliberately mislead the Ghost Master. Who'd have thought that the gentleman's pace would be too fast; so fast, the Long-Tongued Ghost couldn't dodge in time, and thus... he boldly made use of his murderous aura, resulting in..."

The Scorpion gently laughed coldly, shoved Yu Qiufeng away, leaned askew against the back of a rattan chair that a Poisonous Scorpion had gotten from wherever, and sighed with quite a bit of lament. "What type of person is the most tragic? Those who don't know their own weights, rashly entertaining high aspirations... Sect Leader Yu, do you know what's different between the heart grown in your chest, and the heart grown in mine?"

He lightly patted his own chest, looking at the man with a set-up-on-high pity, and shook his head. "The one I grew is a heart of ambition. The one you grew... is a heart of wish-ful thin-king."

Yu Qiufeng's expression cleared up a bit, and he suddenly spoke up with a mosquito-like voice. "I... Daoist Huang, Feng Xiaofeng... every one of us, the vague information we received before... had actually been all you... all you..."

An aloof smile appeared on the others' face. "That's right. How difficult it is... Lao Meng is my client, wanting to utilize me to silently kill. Zhao Jing is my client, wanting to utilize me to impede his partner, Lao Meng. Sun Ding is my client, too, wanting to utilize me to fabricate a bunch of falsehoods, frame Xue Fang — whose whereabouts are still unknown — for the things he had done, and thus eliminate his nemesis via the Valley's rules and the Ghost Master's hands... as for me, I was originally a businessman that relied on killing people and selling things to grow my enterprise. If one can't fish up some money in troubled waters, how could they be worthy of the title of 'Poisonous Scorpion'? ...Wouldn't you agree, Sect Leader Yu?"

He shook his head, then stood. An underling immediately stepped forth and draped a large cloak over the Scorpion, who no longer looked at Yu Qiufeng. "Four Seasons Manor has lied low for over ten years. I heard that it was playing lackey for the Dynasty. Heh... what are they, even? This martial forest is now in the palm of my hand... you're really lucky, Sect Leader Yu, to be able to come across me when things have gotten to this extent. What a shame that I can't give any mercy, as Lao Meng and Zhao Jing have both told me to get rid of you. I really can't bear it, ah... but what's to be done? All I can do is try my best to make you an understanding ghost. No need to feel grateful."

Once he was finished speaking, he had since walked quite far away, the Poisonous Scorpions immediately following after him. Abruptly, Yu Qiufeng's whole body jolted, and he lowered his head — a Scorpion's hook had penetrated his back, pierced through his body, came through to the front of his chest, and jabbed apart his raggedy shirt, exposing a blue-tinged tip.

Acute pain enshrouding him, he hissed and shrieked. The Scorpion restraining him expressionlessly drew the hook out, a large amount of flesh and blood flying out with it, and then, without looking at him, turned to follow his companions.

Yu Qiufeng spasmed all over. He knew that he was going to die. Never before in his life had he been so hopeless. The sensation of sharp pain slowly dulled, numbing at first, then spreading cold throughout him. He fought to keep his eyes wide, but his vision continued to fade, as if there was an irresistible force pulling him downwards.

His hand unconsciously gripped the grass growing on the ground, pulling it up by the roots in his convulsion-like grip. All of a sudden, he saw a pair of shoes stop before his eyes. He tried hard to raise his head, but couldn't clearly see who it was. Several piecemeal sounds came from his mouth: "Help... help... help..."

That someone seemed to crouch down next to him. "Level waters green the color of the willows," the other said. "The moon and the flowers keep distant mutual watch. Year upon year upon age upon age, every time... every time, what?"

Those few, understated verses were like thunder, instantly exploding in his ears. At a loss, he looked up, but still couldn't see their appearance clearly. As if hallucinating, he couldn't even say whether they were male or female, only vaguely recalling... that there had been a giggling maiden, who loved to wear green.

Liu Qianqiao. Such a hard-to-look-at woman. Why had she gotten high hopes with him? She'd been a fool. One fan, and one verse, had been enough to make her dead-set.

"Every time... the ice vanishes later." Those phrases, long forgotten and once recited casually, were suddenly awakened from his memory in this instant of intersection between life and death. "Several times, the blue sea is calm. Mountain snow... is separated from cloudy peaks. One glance... one glance sees infinite youth. Only this... this heart... is so... old..."

One glance sees infinite youth; only this heart is so old.

He had blurted that out. She had kept it in mind unto death. All his life, he calculated against others, and others calculated against him. Only one such woman had treated him sincerely — missed, then gone.

Yu Qiufeng's slightly-parting lips finally stopped moving. Hand clutching the muddied grass, his eyes looked blankly to one side, pupils unfocused — they bore his pledge of eternal love of questionable validity, and reflected a road that was infinitely dark, sinister, and cold.

Dust returned to dust. Earth returned to earth.

Zhou Zishu crouched beside him for a time, looking down as if in deep thought, then sighed, reaching out to close his eyes. “Thanks for letting me know,” he said, not very sincerely.

He stood, and followed the Scorpions’ trail.

Zhao Jing amassed heroes of all sorts in the Central Plains, about to strike Fengya Mountain in the name of rectifying the righteous path, taking revenge, and eliminating grudges. The oath of ‘no one comes in, no one comes out’ from thirty years prior was already broken. In this world, where evildoers were to all be thrown out, a thorough purge would begin.

Simultaneously, a figure that had not been in anyone’s view for a very long time arrived at Fengya Mountain.

The mountain was as tall as a thousand blades. Surrounded on all sides, Green Bamboo Ridge was in its middle.

It was the midst of early summer, where plants were just starting to flourish, and birds were going on riots. A small path wound straight into the valley. Were it not for the gigantic sign saying ‘Those with Souls, Do Not Pass’, it would resemble a paradise of gorgeous scenery.

This was Ghost Valley.

A tall figure appeared beside the giant stone signboard. Tilting his head back to view it for a minute, the faint trace of a smile suffused his face.

This was Wen Kexing. He himself wasn’t even sure what route he had taken, to have reached the Valley a step ahead of everyone else. He was leading a straight-black horse along; the beast seemed to have intelligence, pacing fretfully near the sign like it was unwilling to enter.

He smiled, reaching out to pet its face. He took off both its bridle and saddle, then pat it on its body. “Go on.”

In a human-like way, the horse blinked its big eyes as it watched him for a time. After trotting a few steps away, it looked back at the man, as if somewhat reluctant to part from him. Upon witnessing him wave at it, it sped off in large strides.

Wen Kexing stood in place for a second. “Those with souls, do not pass...” he sneered. With a raise of his hand, there seemed to be a strong gust wrapped inside his sleeve as he harshly swiped the stone sign, thus erasing three-fourths of its words with a bang. Detritus fell down in succession. That enormous sound barged into the Valley as it was carried along with the wind, reverberating non-stop.

Shortly after, a gray silhouette appeared out of thin air. The shouts coming from his mouth were extremely sharp, like pieces of iron slashing against each other, and hearing them could give one goosebumps. “Who dares to trespass...”

His subsequent words got stuck in his throat, that gray shadow halting three zhang away from Wen Kexing. After getting a good look at who had come, an indescribable, utterly fearful expression appeared on him in an instant, gurgling sounds coming out of his larynx. He almost couldn't form any sounds. “V-V-V... Valley Master.”

Quickly reacting, he knelt onto the ground with a plop, then buried his head down low, as if he was soon about to be buried, period. “Respectful greetings to you, Valley Master,” he trembled out.

Wen Kexing didn't even glance at him. “Have Lao Meng and Sun Ding come back yet?” he asked, indifferent. “Tell them to come and see me.”

Not waiting for the minor Ghost to answer him, he passed right by him. The gray-clothed man nevertheless seemed to have just endured a life-and-death catastrophe; it wasn't until the other had gone far away that he shakily looked up, his entire back already soaked with cold sweat.

Slowly, he betrayed a hateful expression, stood up, and soundlessly slipped into the woods. Ghost Valley's Master — that was a genuine lunatic, a real evil demon. His moods fluctuated, where one moment, he would be chatting with someone, all smiles, and the next, he might have snatched the other's head.

Apart from Purple Danger, who he had raised since childhood, no one else dared to make too loud of a noise before him, since he was a lunatic. He loved nothing, and appeared to have no desires. His entire being was akin to a machine that could only massacre.

No one could bribe him. No one knew what he was thinking. No one knew what he wanted. No one knew when he would create disasters. No one knew how to avoid his blows.

Outsiders knew not a thing, but this place was the land of evil Ghosts.

No morality, no humanity. The weak were only meat for the strong to feast upon — and he was strong, so he could do whatever he wanted. Even if he was just standing around to survey the land, jabbering about household matters, he would still make people act like they were facing a huge enemy.

That was because, in general, wolves would not have the patience to jabber with rabbits.

Yet, even if this madman didn't look like a human, he still was one. The gray-clothed Ghost's eyes flashed — the madman had just walked himself into a dead end, but he didn't even know it.

After less than three quarter-hours of time, Lao Meng hurried to Yama Hall. There was nobody else idly waiting within it, sans the lone Wen Kexing, as well as the unfamiliar maid standing beside him. The man had already changed out of his travel-dirtied clothes, now wrapped in dark, long robes, and was seated languidly atop a spacious chair.

His hair was loose, as if it had just been washed. The maid was cautiously combing it.

Less than half of his face was concealed beneath his crow-black hair, but the corners of his mouth still held a smile, crimson, and those robes had been hastily tied with a dark red belt. His whole body gave off a bit of a ghastly aura.

Lao Meng worked him out in his head. He knew himself to have the upper hand, but upon seeing how he was, a chill seeped through his bones, for some reason. Barely able to settle his emotions, he knelt deferentially, then lowered his eyes to dodge Wen Kexing's gaze. "Respectful greetings to you, Valley Master."

Final Volume. Gratitude, Resentment, Affection, Hatred

Chapter 70 - The Eve

Wen Kexing's gaze landed upon him. Slightly tilting his head, he sized Lao Meng up like an inquisitive child, as if he was seeing him for the first time. Lao Meng braced himself as he knelt there. After not too long of a time, he was already getting suspicious, unable to suppress his own shivering.

No... it wasn't time yet. There was absolutely no way that he could prevail alone over this man. He needed help...

"Hm. Where's Sun Ding?" Wen Kexing suddenly asked.

Lao Meng had known from the get-go that he would ask this question, so he didn't panic, bringing up the answer he had pre-prepared: from the infighting between Gao Chong and Zhao Jing, to Xue Fang's appearance, as well as Sun Ding's impetuous advancement and presently-unknown status.

The other gave an ah. "In light of what you've said, Sun Ding has likely been lost within it?" he asked, mild.

Lao Meng lowered his head to admit his error. "It was this subordinate that had handled it poorly."

Wen Kexing went quiet. There was extreme silence all around. Lao Meng couldn't help but want to look up to see his reaction, yet rigidly controlled himself — for eight years, this man had been an existence to make one shudder, and when he was quiet, he could make their skin crawl all the more.

Yet, unexpectedly, after waiting a long time, he only heard Wen Kexing drop one airy phrase from his mouth. "Since guests are arriving, go make preparations. They are renowned jianghu names that cannot be slighted."

Lao Meng could finally no longer control himself, raising his head to see him. He had been holding the notion that he would be losing a layer of skin, not expecting that the other would be so tolerant as to let him go.

"Is there anything else?" Wen Kexing asked, expressionless.

Lao Meng hurriedly shook his head. "No. This subordinate will withdraw."

Bent over with his head lowered, he faced the man as he drew back to the entryway, after which he respectfully bowed again, then turned to leave. However, Wen Kexing seemed to have suddenly remembered something, calling out to him. "Hold on a second."

Lao Meng's cheek twitched a little. He didn't dare to look up, pausing in his steps in accordance with his words.

"Ah-Xiang has freshly found a husband," he heard the other say, slightly cheerfully. "I promised that I would give her an accompanying two-and-a-half streets of dowry. Go get that ready for me, and don't be too stingy."

"Understood," Lao Meng answered, stooping over.

Upon withdrawal, he came to be under the sun, and gently wiped the cold sweat off his face, stoic as he walked away. An ominous premonition abruptly caged his heart, as he had the general feeling that the man appeared to have gleaned something... he had about eighty-percent certainty of the outcome right now, but there were still some variables, such as the missing Hanged Ghost, Xue Fang.

Lao Meng's scheme was very simple; he knew that Xue Fang, that trash, would never be able to find any intermediaries from famed, upright sects. By happenstance, he had previously had contact with Zhao Jing, and used that opportunity to straight-up earn some power, make Zhao Jing mistakenly believe him to have the key, then initiate an alliance. Now, their enemies were all gone, and the Lapis Armor was complete, so that alliance had naturally fallen apart. Zhao Jing and he would stake their lives fighting, and whoever was the one that ultimately opened the arsenal... well, it was either live, or die.

He was shoving Wen Kexing out right now to have them fight without rest; could Xue Fang, hiding his head and showing his tail with the key, really be able to keep away the whole time? He had taken the thing in order to open the arsenal himself, and now that the Armor was complete, Lao Meng didn't have faith that would be able to help himself.

Indeed, another aim of this war was to draw Xue Fang out. At that time, he would reap the profits of others' fights, and still have the manpower of the Poisonous Scorpions available for use.

Following Lao Meng's exit, Wen Kexing looked like he was playing with a tiny creature as he toyed with the leaves of a flower growing in a pot. The maid was carefully combing his hair, until she suddenly wasn't careful and pulled a strand of his hair. The man slightly creased his brow, and she promptly thudded into a kneel; her

entire body shook like a thin leaf in a huge storm, voice like spider silk. “Valley Master... I...”

He gently reached out to lift up her chin, only to see the maiden’s face turn white with fright. He thus sighed. “Why, was someone offended? Did another force you to attend to me as a scapegoat?”

A smile was put upon her face, uglier than crying, as she forced herself to talk. “Serving you, Valley Master, is... is this slave’s good fortune, is...”

Eyes cooling down, he let her go. “If you’re unhappy, say so. If I were you, I certainly wouldn’t be willing to come throw my life away in the presence of a great devil. And yet, you actually...”

He glanced at the girl who shook like a sieve, about to be scared to death, and suddenly stopped talking, losing interest in speaking with her. Standing up, he leaned over to pick up the comb that had fallen to the floor, then waved her off. “You can go.”

The maiden was startled at first, becoming overjoyed soon after. Looking up at him as if she had practically escaped catastrophe, she subsequently tamped down her expression with speed, too afraid to be too obvious in her actions. “Okay,” she whispered, then fled at flying speed, lest he change his mind.

Inside the massive Yama Hall, he was left by himself with a flowerpot. It really resembled the underworld, not one bit of a human air to it at all.

He felt like his mind had been thoroughly corrupted by these people. Once, he had been incomparably familiar with, incomparably accustomed to such environs, and when no one was around, he would feel secure, his heart at ease. After going out for a trip and then coming back, though, he found that this place he had lived in for a full eight years had gotten suffocating.

None of you have to worry, actually, he silently thought. Once I find a real road to the human world, I’ll turn back into a human, turn into the same as I had been ‘outside’ — laid-back and even-tempered, no longer temperamental, no longer insane, no longer living a life of casually killing people. There will... be someone beside me, too... he isn’t afraid of me, and I’m good to him. He’s someone I can be with for a lifetime...

He hooded his eyes, as if recalling something. A smile, neither sinister nor indifferent, appeared on his face, and he gently released the plant he was furling.

Living life... what a pretty phrase that was.

Zhou Zishu looked a bit tragic at the moment. Anybody that had followed a bunch of Scorpions for over half a month wouldn't be too nice to look at, either, but in his opinion, this wasn't anything too strenuous.

The Great Shaman's medicine had been of great effect, nearly eliminating his ailment. It had been described as being able to suppress the Seven Acupunctures poison, and then it did. The pain that once inevitably broke out every midnight, reducing him to a half-alive state, was suddenly gone, which he was somewhat unaccustomed to. In any case, he wasn't a finicky person; the assignments he had been required to go out and do himself in Tian Chuang had generally been a lot more difficult than this.

After this over-half-month, the Poisonous Scorpions stopped in a small town about thirty li away from Fengya Mountain. The Scorpion gave an order, and all the others, well-trained, switched into a black mass of clothes, dressing up as commoners of all trades. Like drops of water, they soon 'vanished' into the town's populace.

Whilst Zhou Zishu was following by example, beneath the calm appearance of this unremarkable town, a dark undercurrent bubbled.

As if waiting for somebody, the Scorpion stopped here, and refused to budge.

In just a few days, word on the wind came in — Zhao Jing was leading the heroes of the realm, spreading out notices for heroism far and wide to crusade against the flock of evil Ghosts. What was most thought-provoking was that he only disseminated notices, not at all invoking the 'Writ of the Land'.

Reverend Cimu truly was an old monk as cunning as a thousand-year tortoise. As soon as Gao Chong had died, he sniffed something off on the breeze, then immediately fell 'horribly ill'. As if the Buddha had finally remember this faithful believer of his, he swiftly went to beckon him to Sukhavati.

Another holder of the Writ, the 'descendant' of the Ancient Monk, Ye Baiyi, was also somewhere unknown.

Meanwhile, Gu Xiang's quartet bore a different mission. Undergoing a simple disguise dress-up, they then caught up with the murderous-looking people that had scrambled for the Mountain.

Cao Weining quickly noticed that this time around, not only had his shishu, Mo Huaikong, come in person from Qingfeng Sword Sect, but even his Sect Leader shifu, Mo Huaiyang, had as well.

He was a bit unclear on the situation. He and his shifu had initially been sent down the mountain because his shifu had been in seclusion — had he come out of it, now?

The two primary figures of the Sect were mingling here with Zhao Jing — did his shifu know the true face of that Zhao hypocrite, or no?

Mo Huaikong had always been a prick, but Mo Huaiyang seemed a bit like an immortal. He was quite a bit skilled in talking with people, was pleasant to all, wasn't arrogant or ill-tempered, and could win over peoples' hearts. It wasn't strange at all that back when he and Mo Huaikong were of equal excellence, the position of Sect Leader had landed upon him.

The quartet rented a carriage, pretending to be the younger generations of average peasants. Smears on their faces was some alleged 'face-changing' stuff that Gu Xiang had made up; in reality, it was just some yellow that made them hard to notice, totally not on the same level as Zhou Zishu's massive overhaul.

Knowing that Cao Weining's shifu was present, Gu Xiang got slightly more nervous. The exact circumstances were currently fuzzy, Zhao Jing was dominating the situation at large, Cao Weining was wavering, and Zhang Chengling plus Gao Xiaolian were all of a sudden seeing their father-murdering enemy, eyes nearly red, only barely consolable.

Of the four of them, Gu Xiang alone was still capable of thinking things over with a cool head, so no one else had any ideas. Now, it was the female Zhuge, Ah-Xiang, that had the prerogative.

"This is an extremely pressing matter," she said. "Think about it, Brother Cao. If you rashly go up to your shifu and tell him, will he believe you, or that 'Hero' Zhao?"

Cao Weining pondered this for a minute, then didn't have much of a retort, feeling that she had made sense. "Alright. I'll listen to you," he said with a nod, like a husband at his wife's beck and call.

Seeing that he was this okay with talking it over, she sighed in relief. In truth, she had brought another type of scenario to mind: Mo Huaikong would be easy to deal with, but Mo Huaiyang, who was downmountain all of a sudden, was with Zhao Jing like this. Had he really been hoodwinked by him, or did he have some other plan? There had been several days where she had braved the danger, nearly getting discovered several times, in order to observe him, and she believed that the old man was not so simple a character.

"How should we do this, then, Miss Gu?" Gao Xiaolian asked.

"We wait," she stated without hesitation. "We haven't yet found Ye Baiyi. With so few of us, we can't do any big, sky-overturning tricks, let alone with this many people. Even Zhao Jing by himself would be enough for us to eat dirt. Since they've all rushed to Ghost Valley, which isn't an easy-to-pick persimmon, there's going to be a huge fight..."

She paused, brows creasing as she suddenly thought: Why did her Master tell her to go find Ye Baiyi right now? Weren't Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman similarly idle? Their methods were far-reaching, so wouldn't having them go be half the work with twice the effect? She remembered Wen Kexing's words, where he said that a woman marrying off was like spilled water, and that she would have no connection to the Valley from then on out. Did he think... that the Valley had no chance of victory in this war?

What was he... actually planning?

“Ah-Xiang?”

Cao Weining patted her on the shoulder, and only then did she snap out of it. “We can't do anything for right now,” she continued. “Just follow after them, quietly watch for changes, and take note of Ye Baiyi's movements.”

On the surface, she was nonchalant, but her mind was being cautious. Even having Wen Kexing's protection, living in the Valley for so many years had been enough for her to have more survival skills than typical girls. In this instant, she became the linchpin amongst the four; with her statement issued, no one refuted it.

They then went on like so without mishap, until a few days later, when an incident occurred.

Ye Baiyi... had shown up.

Chapter 71 - Infighting

Zhao Jing and his crew had already come to stand below Fengya Mountain at this pivotal moment. Gu Xiang's group stole into another road like thieves, hiding behind a big rock. She, having grown up on the Mountain, was infinitely familiar with this route; she had picked out an excellent spot where they wouldn't easily be found, yet could easily see everyone else's positions.

Zhang Chengling and the rest had never been in a place like this before. They had no idea that, under Gu Xiang's leadership, they had detoured around the sign that said 'those with souls, do not pass', and were already treading upon the territory of Ghost Valley, one foot inside this awfully wicked, ominous land.

Thankfully, Gu Xiang had hid them well, and those major figures plus minor Ghosts didn't have the spare time to notice them.

Right then, Ye Baiyi arrived. He traveled by himself on a lone horse, still in his eye-grabbing, strangely thick white clothes. There was a tiny jar held in his arms, and a sword borne on his back.

Zhang Chengling exclaimed, quickly getting his mouth covered by Gu Xiang. It was little wonder that he was shocked — it had only been less than half a year since he had seen him, yet Ye Baiyi's head of dark hair had since turned half white. Looking at him from a distance, he had the same visage carved from stone that was immune to time, but with the gray hair crowning him, a scant, dead aura faintly permeated him.

It was like... the time that had stagnated upon him had suddenly gone into motion. There was nothing seen on his face, only a slight indication visible from his hair, preparing one for when this stone statue was eroded by the wind, and blown away in dust.

Cao Weining stretched out his neck to see, but his line of sight landed upon the sword on Ye Baiyi's back. It was unclear where the man had gotten it from; if it was not carefully examined, one would almost think that he was carrying a giant anti-cavalry sabre, as it was extremely wide and long. From his broad shoulders, a slanted head and a tail were revealed, as a life-like dragon had been engraved into the hilt and scabbard, its back arching like it was about to fly off into the rolling cloud cover at any moment. Merely by looking at it, one could feel its ferocious air of wanting to move, which seemed to stretch over all the way from the end of the sky.

"That's... that's the Ancient Edge of the Dragon's Back... it..." he mumbled to himself.

Gu Xiang narrowed her eyes, looking over. "What is it?" she asked, not too proud to ask a subordinate for knowledge.

Cao Weining was shaking a little. He gently tugged on her sleeve, barely managing to suppress his voice, but unable to suppress his excitement. “Legends say that there’s three legendary swords. The Spiritual Sword of No Name, despite having no sword inscription, is a celebrity amongst swords, extraordinarily bright and unmatched in the world. The Heavy Sword of Great Famine is a general amongst swords, solid and unsullied, unequaled in bravery and ferocity. Neither of them can compare to the Ancient Blade of the Dragon’s Back, though. It’s a soldier of great viciousness, said to be cast from divine iron, where not even divinities can withstand it... it’s hard to imagine that it’d actually be in the hands of the Ancient Monk’s descendant. All three of these famous weapons have been missing, so I didn’t expect to be able to witness the return of the king of all swords today.”

Hearing his muttering, Zhang Chengling untied Great Famine, which hung from his waist. He knew that what Lord Seventh had given him had not been a falsehood. Recalling his elders’ saying of ‘wealth is not to be revealed’, he had smartly wrapped a layer of tattered, inconspicuous cloth around the outside of the scabbard. “G-Great Famine... is here with me,” he said to Cao Weining.

The latter’s eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. He accepted the sword with both hands, trembling, reverently using the tip of his finger to push aside Zhang Chengling’s masterpi... old rag, thus revealing the treasured sword, its jewels coated in dust. Eyes practically brimming with tears of emotion, he shakily pointed at Zhang Chengling and babbled incoherently. “This is Great Famine! The General, Great Famine! You abuser of heavenly artifacts! You... peony-chewing cow! You qin-burner! Crane-cooker! You... y-you’ve... practically done the reprehensible sin of burning books and burying scholars alive!”

Gu Xiang quickly shushed him. The four looked over to see that the crowd on the other side appeared to be pressured by Ye Baiyi’s momentum, automatically making way for him so that he had a path straight to the front of Zhao Jing. There was no expression at all on Ye Baiyi’s face, and he appeared ever arrogant, never dismounting, being up at a high vantage point the whole time he pierced through the crowd.

Zhao Jing was astonished by his graying hair at the onset, immediately after which he could no longer keep his expression on... speaking of which, his skills of restrained self-conduct were far inferior to Gao Chong’s, but one had been protecting secrets, while the other had held the desire for murder. That was how the gap in superiority had been established.

He forced himself to clasp his fist, smiling. “It’s you, Young Hero Ye. You’ve really come just in time! Join us in our crusade—“

“The Lapis Armor. Do you have it, or not?” Ye Baiyi harshly cut him off, still not getting off his horse as he looked at him indifferently.

The crowd went into an uproar. Zhao Jing's face went stiff.

Zhang Chengling and the others listened, hearts jumping in fear. Gu Xiang's brows furrowed. "What's going on?" she asked those around her. "Is he not with them?"

"No, Miss Gu," Gao Xiaolian whispered in reply. "Hero Ye is one of the owners of the 'Writ of the World'. The Writ's three pieces, when collected together, can summon the heroes of the realm. Only one of those pieces was in the hands of the Ancient Monk, and he's ignored worldly affairs for a long time. For Dongting, my dad had personally gone to the foot of Changming Mountain to ask for him, but he just sent a disciple of his down the mountain. Hero Ye only defends the Writ; he doesn't associate with others at all, acting by himself always."

After thinking for a bit, she added something on. "Truthfully, dad was surprised to get Hero Ye. Af... after all, there's rumors saying that the Monk has already passed on."

Those of jianghu only knew that the Monk existed, and nothing of his name, surname, age, or background. However, calculating the age of the Writ, at least a hundred years had elapsed. That the 'Ancient Monk' had long passed during such a long interim was not a very surprising rumor.

Zhao Jing looked annoyed, and needing to raise his head to see Ye Baiyi made him even more unhappy. "What do you mean, Hero Ye?" he asked with a cold smile.

Ye Baiyi squandered not much of an expression, paying him no mind. He merely swept his gaze over his surroundings, then slightly raised the volume of his voice. "It does not matter whether you all fight, or cause a ruckus. Anyone that wants to crusade can do so. However, there is one clause: as long as I am alive, no one should even think of opening the arsenal."

This man still cared about no one, his tone like he wouldn't care about the Heavenly Emperor, either. Even Zhou Zishu, one who had self-restraint skills, had repeatedly ground his teeth and wanted to beat him up, to say nothing of these folks that didn't know of him in detail. Someone huffed coldly on the spot. "Hah, the successor of the Ancient Monk really does follow his name. He's got a big mouth and a big ego!"

Ye Baiyi's eyes swept on over. He nearly didn't see who it was that had spoken — it turned out to be Feng Xiaofeng, who had never sat upon Gao Shannu's shoulders ever since the latter went blind, instead acting as his eyes and constantly looking out for him. He still had the look of a thortip that could explode with one bump, and gave no one any face. If ranking with the top in terms of mean words, he could be called a tyrant of jianghu, but he still held some affection for his Gao Shannu.

“I’m not joking around,” Ye Baiyi answered.

“He’s the one that stirred up this situation, right?” Gu Xiang asked Cao Weining, voice hushed.

Zhang Chengling had followed the others to the Puppet Manor in Shuzhong. He knew something of the sequence of events, and whispered to them. “That... Senior Ye... is not a ‘Young’ Hero. He’s really old, and said to be the master of Rong Xuan that had died thirty years ago.”

After that, he explained to them what he knew.

The other three stared back at him for a long time, after which Gu Xiang sighed. “By my own grandma... how long has he been alive? He’s like a tortoise!”

Witnessing her no longer speaking human language, Cao Weining quickly cut her off. “So, that’s to say that the most crucial object in the arsenal is actually... Elder Ye? He came down the mountain, heard about the Lapis Armor, and then went to inquire after the old truth?”

Gu Xiang tugged at him, pointing at the people below. “Hey, look. They’re starting to fight.”

The four moved their heads out from behind the boulder at the same time, carefully observing.

This squad of righteous martial artists all individually harbored their own ulterior motives to begin with; so, of course, there was also a subset incorporated within them that was particularly stupid. They had legitimately been duped by Zhao Jing, resolving to behead evil Ghosts for the sake of the common folk. Ye Baiyi’s words had been a rock smashing down, sending off a thousand waves.

Some people whispered in suspicion, while even more were instigated by those who wanted them to be. Ye Baiyi’s search for a beating roused the mob into rebuking him in a rage. “From how I see it, that guy’s a problem,” one said. “He had been sought out by Gao Chong, and was always following him in Dongting. He has to be his crony!”

Ye Baiyi had always been a gentleman that acted, not spoke. Hearing this, he pulled out a horse whip, and the one in question got a clear view of it coming towards his face, yet still wasn’t able to dodge. He got roughly whipped flying, which left a blood-red mark on his face—a symmetrical one.

Zhao Jing issued a signal with his eyes. Several people pounced at Ye Baiyi at once, and the crowd could barely see how he was moving; the several flew out to

encircle him, but in the blink of an eye, each of them were sent rolling back out with missing arms or shortened legs. Meanwhile, the horse-riding Ye Baiyi seemed to have not moved a bit, still steadily holding the tiny jar in one hand and the horse whip in the other.

The man's martial arts were horrifically high-tier. Zhao Jing's eye twitched. "Let's all calm down, first," someone else was heard to say. "The Ancient Monk has been someone of virtue for a long time, so his descendant certainly can't be worse. Regardless of whatever happened with Gao Chong, the Writ is infallible."

Cao Weining's eyes widened when he heard that voice — the speaker was his shifu, Mo Huaiyang. He couldn't help but get nervous, one hand clenching into a fist as he sweat. He simply listened to the man use an amiable tone towards Ye Baiyi.

"Hero Ye, what you say must have foundation. You cannot blurt words out at random. We'd be happy to believe you, so I ask that you be blunt and let everyone to know: is the Armor actually in someone's hands, and are we being used?"

Gu Xiang surveyed with a cool eye, noticing that at this moment, the group had already vaguely split into two factions. Mo Huaiyang had kept silent the whole journey, very subdued, yet had been able get power equal to Zhao Jing's at some unknown point in time.

This bunch of heroes had gathered up, turned into a rowdy mob, and, before they had even reached the Mountain, began to fight amongst themselves.

She snuck a peek at Cao Weining, even more certain in her heart... that the shifu of this dumb bloke had high ambitions for this trip.

Zhao Jing hadn't expected that Mo Huaiyang would turn traitor, pretty much itching to tear the man's skin off. Still, he couldn't stop Ye Baiyi from talking. Wouldn't that be a guilty conscience?

Ye Baiyi wasn't buying Mo Huaiyang's stuff, though, only speaking coldly. "Opening the arsenal requires two items: the Armor and the key. I've investigated for a long time, and can guess that the key is probably in the hands of someone from Ghost Valley. If they also have the Armor, would they have bode their time in wait to fight with you all now? If they vainly attempt to open the arsenal... hah. I'll have to take on the role of an exorcist, then."

"The Armor had been in Gao Chong's hands," Zhao Jing defended. "Prior to his death, he wanted to join forces with the Hanged Ghost to kill me, failed to achieve that, then died himself. Xue Fang's whereabouts are unknown, so the Armor is presumably with him..."

Ye Baiyi sneered. "I've actually heard that Ghost Valley has constantly been sending people to hunt down Xue Fang, but the Delighted Mourning Ghost, one of his hunters, died a few days ago. If Xue Fang has that kind of remarkable skill, why hasn't he opened the arsenal yet, instead of hiding away?"

"What the Delighted Mourning Ghost did was the evil of murdering someone for their property. Why would I know anything about these evil Ghosts? More likely than not, the spoils were split unevenly, and both sides are suffering for it. In any case, Gao Chong was sly, and had lots of henchmen; how would I know who he gave the Armor to?"

"Oh. The Armor that the five major families once watched over together has been lost, yet you're not investigating that like everybody else, instead bringing people to attack Fengya Mountain. Where's the logic in that, Hero Zhao?" Ye Baiyi countered.

His speech was getting increasingly menacing. Zhao Jing was dumbstruck for a moment, then bit back. "In light of your implication, those nefarious, evil demons that everyone needs to catch and behead... shouldn't be killed?"

Mo Huaiyang frowned, then meandered behind Ye Baiyi, immediately after which almost half of the crowd followed him away from Zhao Jing's side.

"Sect Leader Mo, what is the meaning of this?" the latter questioned.

"Don't speak of other things, Hero Zhao. Let's just get a clear explanation, then judge things from that."

Zhao Jing had long been aware that Mo Huaiyang was disloyal. This old devil that's taking advantage of a fire to loot will be a liability from now on, if I don't get rid of him here and establish my might, he thought, a fire in his heart.

While he thought, he made a small gesture with his fingers. The people on-scene were in disorder, so none of them noticed, but Gu Xiang's group caught the abnormality via their vantage point, after which they saw a very plain person behind Zhao Jing slip out of the crowd after seeing his gesture. They kept staring the entire time, then witnessed the person retreat to the outside of the group, and make another gesture in one direction. Inside the dense forest, a black shadow flitted past, holding a tiny crossbow in their hand.

Poisonous Scorpions!

At once, Cao Weining no longer had time to think. He jumped out from behind the rock, his moves of transport reaching their pinnacle. "Shifu!" he shouted, "Look out!"

Gu Xiang wasn't able to hold him back, feeling a chill in her heart.

Chapter 72 - Exposed

Cao Weining flew over, then brushed aside the weapon the Scorpion had shot at Mo Huaiyang. Watching him step forward, Zhang Chengling subconsciously motioned to get up, only to be pushed back down by Gu Xiang.

She sucked in a deep breath, though it felt like it couldn't sink down into her chest, getting stuck there alongside the scent of the forest vegetation. Her fingers trembled slightly, their tips unconsciously squeezing the clothes on Zhang Chengling's shoulder. "Don't move," she whispered. "None of you move."

Cao Weining's sudden appearance had everyone startled in his wake, except for Zhao Jing, who reacted immediately. "Where's the rat that's hiding its head and sneak attacking?!"

Someone beside him quickly understood, flashing his weapon as if facing a massive foe. "Careful, everyone!" he shouted. "Watch out for ambush from the evil Ghosts!"

The recent hostile, arguing atmosphere in the crowd changed once again. The Scorpion hiding in the darkness had swiftly evacuated after their strike, not caring whether they had succeeded or not, to the point that the mob couldn't even catch the assassin.

Gu Xiang watched clearly, the inside of her head a mess. Cao Weining going out right now had been a huge mistake. With the situation like so, there was someone like Zhao Jing, who would most likely use the issue to advance his own goals, and like Mo Huaiyang, who had deep schemes and unfathomable secrets, and like Ye Baiyi, who had rushed over to conceitedly look for trouble...

Mo Huaikong, who had just been thinking to snatch power using Ye Baiyi's appearance, promptly realized that now was not a good time, since they were all currently still standing on the border of Ghost Valley and everything had turned into trouble. Upon seeing Cao Weining right now, he didn't think much more on it, merely frowning.

He knew what was going on with Cao Weining, Gu Xiang, and the rest, so he hurriedly called out, "Why did you only now catch up, you brat? Were you using your feet to embroider this whole time? Get over here!"

This made it seem like he had simply been sent by his shishu to go do something.

Even though Cao Weining really wasn't the brightest, he wasn't stupid. He verbally agreed, then quietly walked behind Mo Huaikong.

However, if things were so simple, Gu Xiang wouldn't have instantly been out of ideas; others didn't care, but Feng Xiaofeng was still around. He remembered that she had blinded Gao Shannu with poison, and considered Cao Weining to be a jackal of the same pack. Seeing him was akin to seeing his father-killing nemesis. "You still have the face to show up in front of everyone, Cao Weining?!" he shrieked. "You've taught up a really good disciple, Mo! He's buddied up with a demon, been seduced by beauty, and aids evil-doers!"

Cao Weining stopped in his tracks, thinking, It's all over.

Hearing that, Mo Huaiyang's gaze fell upon Cao Weining, face slightly dark. "What's going on? Where have you gone to?"

"Shifu, I ran into a few friends from Nanjiang, and helped them to handle some dregs of the Black Shamans," the other answered respectfully. "I had accidentally cut off contact with shishu. I didn't know that everyone was here, nor did I expect to have the fortune to meet with you, since I came to find Yo... H... Hero Ye."

None of that was false, actually. He hadn't told the total truth, but his body language wasn't flustered, and his road of thought was clear and reasonable. After this, he clasped his fist towards Ye Baiyi. "Hero Ye, this humble one was entrusted by another to request something of you."

Ye Baiyi gave him a rather surprised look. "Who did? What is it?"

"There's a friend that's been heavily injured, and needs to heal somewhere extremely cold. They're wondering if Changming Mountain's sacred site could be borrowed for it..."

The man had no reaction at first, dazed for a short moment, then gave a perfunctory answer. "Tell that friend to do as they will. At the foot of the mountain is Changming Village, and past it is a road that leads all the way to the waist. The area I live in is near the summit, though. Whether you can get there depends on your skills."

Cao Weining knew that Gu Xiang could hear him, and this could thus be seen as completing one task. "Many thanks."

Ye Baiyi nodded. As if suddenly getting bored, he turned his horse's head around without a sound, about to leave this place of right and wrong. Mo Huaiyang shot a glance at Zhao Jing's group still looking like this matter wasn't finished, mind racing, then blocked Ye Baiyi. "Hero Ye. Your words have been unclear. Can you really just leave like so?"

The other looked at him. "What else do you want? I've already given a clear explanation," he answered, indifferent. "Zhao isn't anything good. As for you..."

His stiff mouth revealed a stiff smile, and he spoke coldly, like a corpse come to life. “I don’t think you’re anything at all.”

The corner of Mo Huaiyang’s eye twitched. Zhao Jing had just nearly been forced into dire straits, only able to sigh in relief due to Cao Weining’s interruption. “This Zhao is a rough man,” he said upon seeing this scene, “and I don’t conduct myself with the caution and order that those of you who read do, always acting upon whatever I think up... Gao Chong used to be my brother. What a shit-fated friendship. I don’t know what he was plotting. At this point, I hate him, but I hate Fengya Mountain’s sons of bitches even more!”

His tigreresque eyes opened wide, bulging in a desire to split open, and his hackles instantly raised. “This thing with the Lapis Armor was caused by Ghost Valley thirty years ago,” he shouted. “Thirty years later, this disaster’s arisen because of them yet again! Our power hadn’t been enough before, so we couldn’t wipe out these demons, leading to us being troubled by them instead. There’s so many calamities happening in the martial forest now — is that still not enough?”

The rowdy crowd went quiet once more. Zhao Jing appeared to calm a bit, looking at Ye Baiyi. “Hero Ye, you’ve been in seclusion on Changming Mountain the year round, so you wouldn’t know,” he said, cordial. “There are some things in this world that are not what they appear to be on the surface. I don’t know who’s deceived you, for you to have such a misunderstanding towards me...”

His voice subtly paused there, and he swept a look at Mo Huaiyang.

That implication did not need to be stated. Why had Ye Baiyi suddenly shown up as a lone rider, and Mo Huaiyang taken the lead of others right now? Was that not pre-planned?

After that, his gaze fell upon Cao Weining. “Hero Cao, I’ve always seen you as a young talent with a boundless future, and an honest person that comprehends what courtesy, justice, honor, and shame are, as well as understands what loyalty and filial piety are—”

Feng Xiaofeng stepped forth. Zhao Jing reached out to stop him. “I heard you say that you have conflict with them because of a lady, Brother Feng. There was even a huge fight with many unknown people mixed within, and they abducted Zhang Chengling...”

Cao Weining’s back went stiff.

The name ‘Zheng Chengling’ was eternally linked to the Lapis Armor, a very sensitive subject at the moment. As soon as that came out, even Mo Huaiyang’s expression was off, and he grit his teeth. “What’s going on, you little bastard?”

Mo Huaikong knew the situation; once the elder noticed that things were getting bad, he quickly spoke up. “Cough, that was just a little wild girl that came from who-knows-where. She didn’t know how to speak, and wasn’t civilized at all...”

Feng Xiaofeng laughed coldly, pulling Gao Shannu out of the crowd. “A little wild girl? Is that right?” he asked, shrill. “What you’re implying, Hero Mo, is that our master-servant pair is really useless, where even a random wild girl could go ape on our heads and blind Ah-Shan, hm? Moreover... on that day, did you not meet a little demoness on the road, then deliberately let them go? Is it because you thought she was attractive that you did that?”

Mo Huaikong’s face swelled up like an eggplant. He restrained himself for a long time, but eventually said, “You fucking bullshitter!”

Feng Xiaofeng went mad, tugging at Gao Shannu as he howled. “You old bastard! Don’t even think about shielding that younger bastard, you’re all in the same pack! If you don’t give Ah-Shan an explanation today, your eyes will be compensating for his!”

Thus, all the heroes that had barely been able to stop for a minute got riled up again.

Mo Huaiyang grit his teeth, asking his question word by word. “Tell me, you little bastard... who is that woman?”

Cao Weining lowered his head, taking a step back. At the very same time, the not-far-away Zhang Chengling had to let out a hiss — Gu Xiang’s nails were pinching his skin.

“I heard that there were two men with the woman,” Zhao Jing sneered, “with weird appearances and bizarre martial arts. They took Zhang Chengling away, too. This Zhao is an ignorant one, and I’m not sure where those two came from.”

Experts unknown to the martial world of the Central Plains... was that not directly referring to Ghost Valley?

Mo Huaiyang slapped a hand onto the center of Cao Weining’s chest, striking him over ten steps back so that he could no longer stand, and making him sit on the ground and cough up a mouthful of blood. He covered his chest with a pale face, yet firmly grit his teeth, not saying a word.

Mo Huaiyang stepped up, looking down on him. “Are you still not going to talk?” he continued to pressure.

He lifted his palm and pressed it down upon Cao Weining’s crown, as if he was going to beat him to death. Mo Huaikong opened his mouth, mumbling, “Shixiong...”

“Shut it,” Mo Huaiyang said coldly. “Cao Weining, are you talking?”

Cao Weining closed his eyes.

Gu Xiang sighed. “No matter what happens, you two absolutely must not come out,” she said to Zhang Chengling and Gao Xiaolian, voice hushed. “Keep this in mind: if you two come out as well, all four of us will die here. You hear me?”

“Sister Gu Xiang...” Zhang Chengling started.

Gao Xiaolian suddenly grabbed him. “Don’t worry,” she told Gu Xiang, looking determined.

The other looked at her, nodded, and then her body suddenly soared, appearing before everyone. “Bah, you all suck! What do you want with me?”

Below Fengya Mountain, the weather was suddenly shifting, but it wasn’t too tranquil on Green Bamboo Ridge, either. A scouting Ghost in gray clothes walked up behind Lao Meng, then said something quietly into his ear. The latter paused, an expression that was quite a bit grotesque upon his face. “What did you say? They’re... fighting down the mountain?”

The Ghost nodded.

Lao Meng’s brow was furrowed in shock for a long while. Then, he suddenly began to laugh, the sound getting louder and louder until he was practically rocking back and forth with mirth. “You said... you said that Zhao Jing and them have started fighting down there... hahahaha! Zhao Jing, ah, Zhao Jing! I took him to be an alpha wolf, like a great enemy, but he’s actually just a sheep, getting betrayed by... by a bunch of ‘righteous sects’! That’s just too funny!”

He laughed abruptly, then stopped just as abruptly. In an instant, no image of a smile was on him, and he was now no longer that kind, sincere old servant. The muscles on his cheeks still slightly trembling, a malevolent tinge slowly showed upon them. “Good. Since that’s the case, we won’t worry about them. Let’s start to settle this debt from the inside. Xiao Ke, go get all of our people in the defenses, and move them to... the agreed place.”

The Ghost was taken aback. Immediately understanding what he was wanting to do, his voice was somewhat unconsciously shaky. “Yes!”

Lao Meng tidied up his clothes, forcefully shut his eyes, then concealed his ferocity. Looking like the same good old man as always, he strode for Yama Hall.

Wen Kexing was carefreely idle, in the middle of painting a picture. When someone was sent by Lao Meng to announce him, he only gave an indifferent answer without lifting his head, hunched over like his entire self was stuck onto the paper.

Lao Meng came in, saw that the other was in a good mood with a smile on his lips, and believed that the Heavens really were aiding him. "Valley Master, the dowry that you ordered me to prepare is ready. May I invite you to take a look at it?"

Wen Kexing affirmed absent-mindedly, not looking up. He made a couple strokes on the paper with the tip of his brush for a long while, then said, "Mn. Wait a second."

Lao Meng obediently bowed his head, lowered his eyes, and waited nearby. The incense stick on the table shortened cun by cun. It was unknown how long had passed before Wen Kexing straightened out his back and contentedly finished up his painting, bobbing his head as he admired it. Lao Meng gave it a brief glance, then saw that the paper scene was extremely simple; it was one tree, several boulders, and a man standing there with no profile, only a view of him from behind.

The man was a bit thin, hints of the bones on his back showing through his loose robes. Lao Meng marveled to himself, Don't tell me that because this lunatic went out on a trip, he's actually started to believe himself to be a human, learning how to be hurt by lovesickness?

Wen Kexing set down the painting, carefully weighted it with paperweights, set it aside to dry, then turned to Lao Meng. Upon seeing him, the tender, warm smile he had immediately turned frigid. "Lead the way," he ordered, terse.

Lao Meng lowered his head, agreed, then turned to go, concealing the fleeting, irrepressible smile at the corner of his mouth.

Chapter 73 - The Rules

As soon as he saw Gu Xiang, Feng Xiaofeng went nuts, screeching and throwing himself forward. “Rotten girl! I’ll slaughter you!”

Gu Xiang went ouch, patting her chest with a fake smile. “You’ll scare me to death, Feng. No one’s teamed up with you today. To bully me, a lady — you have absolutely no lenience!”

“Brother Feng, calm down a bit!” Zhao Jing quickly shouted at Feng Xiaofeng. “So many of us are watching. If she really is a bad person, would she still be able to escape?”

Hearing their scrupulousness, Cao Weining knew that they were going to put on a show about her. With a strength he wasn’t sure where came from, he falteringly got up, then put out an arm to block Gu Xiang’s front, ignoring his dull chest pain and coughing. “Everyone, Ah-Xiang has always been naive, never able to hide the words of her mind, but she is still a junior. Even if she has misspoken in any way, I request that you seniors acknowledge that she’s still young and ignorant, and not stoop to her level.”

He turned to Feng Xiaofeng once more, enunciating his words. “As for you, Hero Feng, this Cao has something to say. That day, Hero Shen met with misfortune, the Lapis Armor was stolen, and the hearts of those in Dongting were panicked. Zhang Chengling had indeed been with us, but the one that brought him away was Brother Zhou, and he did so in Hero Zhao’s presence, who didn’t obstruct it at all. We had to take care of it for him. This Feng fellow cannot distinguish between right and wrong, as he had joined forces with a group of Poisonous Scorpions to hunt us down. Were we wrong to defend ourselves?”

Gu Xiang nimbly stuck out her head from behind him, pointing at Feng Xiaofeng. “It’s true! See how he conducts himself? He looks exactly like everyone else owes him eight hundred strings of coins, wanting to fight when nothing’s even been said! Who knows if he’s with that bunch of black-clothed villains?”

Feng Xiaofeng was extraordinarily furious, but when it came to loquaciousness, he couldn’t contend with her; right as the word ‘you’ had bounced out of his mouth, a pile of words had bounced out of hers like jumping beans. The girl put both hands on her hips, her face full of slyness, and then pointed at him. “What about me? My Master gave me that brat to look after, and bringing him along was way too much trouble! He was thinking that everyone else is just like you lot, with your shamelessness being something the whole world knows about! You and that... surname ‘Yu’ for fish or ‘Gui’ for turtle or whatever, who knows what temple you two came out of? People don’t have signs on their faces for whether they’re good or bad, but looking at you, you don’t seem like anything good! What are you trying to find Zhang Chengling so badly for? You’re the same kind of trash as Yu! Hmph!”

She rolled her eyes, the spitting image of a child throwing a temper. In just a few words, she had also dragged Yu Qiufeng into this; the man had currently turned into an old rat crossing the street that everyone was shouting and kicking at, so, regardless of whether something was true or false or a frame or a set up, there would be no issue with pushing it onto his head.

Feng Xiaofeng was taken aback, anger dizzying his head. He hadn't expected this to go here.

As expected, as soon as she said that, many people started giving him poor looks. Ye Baiyi huffed coldly. "Your type is born not being the stuff for physical arts. You couldn't even grasp six-harmony spiritual cultivation, so what fight could you put up?"

How could anything nice to hear ever come out of Ye Baiyi's mouth? Someone laughed at this scene. Gao Shannu roared, then smashed a rock onto the ground, but he was blind — what use would a bit of brute strength have? Looking at the master-servant pair, Cao Weining thought them to be pitiful.

Perhaps due to his injury, he felt especially fatigued, looking at each individual before him not like they were people, but base-growing plants listening to the rain on the wind, praising those above and stomping on those below... because, no matter what, their own heads weren't getting stomped, so they were happy to watch the excitement.

He tugged at Gu Xiang. "Ah-Xiang, let's go. I'll take over."

She didn't say much, obediently getting towed away by him. He turned to Mo Huaiyang. "Shifu, this disciple is unfilial, and cannot obey you. In my lifetime, I have no sort of great prospects. Working myself hard won't get me fame. so I'm simply taking advantage of my youth to change course. Maybe I'll be an old farmer, relying on some hard swings of tools to grow a lot of little somethings, more than others could. When the time comes, I'll be sure to have you taste that freshness firsthand every year."

Mo Huaiyang looked somewhat less stormy, but he still frowned as he looked at Gu Xiang, feeling that despite the girl's looks being good, there was constantly an unspeakable evil about her. She didn't look like a woman from a decent family. Yet, when he went to talk, Mo Huaikong started making loud noises out of his windpipe. "Hahaha, I knew you were a hopeless brat! When you have a fat son with your little wife, I'll be his grand-shishu! You'll have to treat me to wine on his one-month!"

Cao Weining laughed dryly a few times, thinking, Shishu, your imagination is really getting too far ahead. Gu Xiang's face was a bit heated, but she let out a sigh of relief, knowing that this blockade of theirs was over with.

Right as they made to leave, someone out of the crowd began to speak — it was the man that had always been at Zhao Jing's side, who had flashed his weapon when the Poisonous Scorpion struck. There was a blade scar on his face that slanted down diagonally, dragging down dangerously to his neck.

“Please stay a minute, young lady,” he said. “This humble one has a question.”

Gu Xiang turned her head, listening to him slowly continue on. “Didn't you all notice that the spot she just came out of is somewhere on Fengya Mountain? She trespassed on Ghost Valley, so why haven't the Ghosts done anything yet?”

The blood left her face in an instant. “I'm thinking that there's two possibilities,” he kept going. “One is that she has... an interesting status. Two is that when she went in, no one discovered her, but why would a lone girl going in such a place not be found?”

His words could not be any clearer. Even Cao Weining understood them. He looked over in astonishment, staring at her in a daze and unable to speak.

She released his hand, then took a step back. And another.

Zhao Jing narrowed his eyes, purposefully clapping the scarred man on the shoulder. “Hey, what are you saying?” he said, loud. “She's only so old. What kind of person could she possibly be?”

The man smiled. “Knowing a form and face isn't knowing the heart.”

Zhao Jing pat his head, thinking. “Well, isn't this convenient? People of the Valley have a prominent mark on their lower backs. Were there nothing but us menfolk around, nothing could be done, but heroines of Emei happen to be present. You women won't need to observe propriety, so you can go to a place where no one else is to check. We'll be able to trust the heroines' statement.”

Hearing this, the nearby Sect Leader of Emei nodded, giving no refute.

Cao Weining heard nothing, only staring at her. Once he saw her expression, he understood everything. In his impression, she had forever been a careless, happy-go-lucky young lady that knew no schemes; never before had he seen such a wan, dismal, dark look on her face.

Her smile was gone. Her big, limpid eyes looked to be missing the vigor within them, having only a cold maliciousness. She looked not at him, but at the scarred man, genuinely resembling a ghost.

He recalled what Wen Kexing had once said to him that night: Even if she might not be like what you're imagining, even if... you will find out that you don't actually recognize her?

How had he answered? In that instant, he was a bit distracted. He had... vowed to Wen Kexing, "Don't worry. I know her, of course."

Then, she moved. Her figure was extremely agile, and with but a wink, she overcame Cao Weining to come before the crowd, the scarred man bearing the brunt of it. No one had thought that she would have the guts to attack right in front of everyone.

The man saw that the arrival had no good intentions, subconsciously drawing back. She laughed coldly, abruptly raising her hand — two iron chains shot straight out of her sleeves, going for his face. He bent backwards to dodge, but the chains seemed to have souls, directly winding around his neck. "Hell has no entrance for you to charge into," she called, sinister. "If you want to blame me, go ahead..."

Following that, she yanked the chains backwards with force, attempting to take off his head at once.

Zhao Jing bellowed angrily, unsheathing his sword to stab her. She couldn't dodge, posturing like her life depended on it, waiting for the wide-open opportunity of his thrust to throw out a hidden weapon.

"Ah-Xiang!" Cao Weining shouted.

Caring for nothing, he flew out in front, obstructing Zhao Jing's sword with a clang. He grabbed her hand that was tugging the chains. "Let go! Let's go back home! Ah-Xiang, let go of him, now!"

She startled, involuntarily loosening her hand. The chains fell to the ground. Unawares, she was bodily hauled several paces away by him, after which she mumbled, "Back home?"

He sucked in a deep breath. "Back home."

Zhao Jing sneered. "Very good! Since you're a little Valley demoness, there's no need to quibble! We're not letting you come and go as you please!"

Before he was quite finished, a strong gale attacked him from behind. He dodged, flustered, and turned to look. It was Ye Baiyi — he was holding Dragon's Back, which wasn't unsheathed, yet had still forced him back from that swing.

The man didn't look at him, only speaking to Cao Weining. "The friend you just talked about is a brat with the surname Zhou, right? Take me to find him, and I'll send you both elsewhere."

Everyone was shocked by his act, watching blankly as he was about to bring Gu Xiang and Cao Weining away without ever getting off his horse.

"You dare to leave, Cao Weining?" Mo Huaiyang finally spoke up.

Cao Weining's back stiffened. He stood, turned, and opened his mouth. "Shifu..."

"You go with them," the other said coldly, "and from now on, you will not be a part of my Qingfeng Sword Sect. Fall into the way of evil, and in the future... I will send myself down the same path of principle that all martial artists do, and we will be irreconcilable!"

Cao Weining's form seemed to waver, and Gu Xiang quickly reached out to support him.

"Think this over well," Mo Huaiyang said. "Don't allow one mistake to lead to infinite sorrow."

Cao Weining stood there, blank, for a very, very long time. Gu Xiang felt him grasp her hand for a split second, release it, then hold it even tighter. "Shifu, I pledged to a friend that for my entire life, from that moment until my death, counting every single second, there would never be any time when I would let Ah-Xiang down... you've taught me since childhood to do what I say I will, and do it to completion. I can't eat my words in regards to her family."

Mo Huaiyang looked ashen. He clenched his jaw for a long while, then coldly laughed, giving off three successive 'good's. He abruptly turned, as if he didn't want to look at him anymore.

Cao Weining knelt; Gu Xiang frowned, hesitating a bit, then knelt alongside him. The former kowtowed three times in Mo Huaiyang's direction, and there was an audible sound every time his forehead landed on the ground, blood promptly showing up on it. "This disciple is unfilial!" he cried out, eyes shot red.

After that, he turned to Mo Huaikong and kowtowed thrice again, gritting his teeth, yet unable to say a word. Mo Huaikong peered at him, antsy and wanting to say something, but also feeling like everything he could say would be wrong. All he could do was curse furiously. "Shit! What is this?!"

Gu Xiang then helped him up, Ye Baiyi in wait at the side. Mo Huaiyang turned back around, eyes flashing. "Weining," he called, voice softened, seeming somewhat fragile.

Cao Weining's heart skipped a beat. "Shifu..."

The other took a deep breath. He hesitated for a while, then beckoned for him. "Come over here. I have a few things to say to you."

Ye Baiyi creased his brow, disdaining this bothersome master-disciple pair. He watched as Cao Weining was already going over, then turned his head away; this eternal parting had nothing to do with him, really.

Cao Weining took a few steps forwards, then knelt, using his knees to crawl up before him. Mo Huaiyang looked at him with complicated emotions, shut his eyes, then put his hand on his head with a sigh, as if he was still a little child. "In your generation... I've cherished you the most."

The other choked up. "Shifu, I..."

He couldn't speak further, as this scene of tender emotions suddenly changed its tune. No one had expected that after Mo Huaiyang finished saying that sentence, his hand that was caressing the top of Cao Weining's head would suddenly exert its strength without warning, pressing down upon his crown with the force of ten thousand catties.

Cao Weining immediately spurted blood from all seven orifices. Gu Xiang screamed, and blood splashed onto Mo Huaikong. The latter couldn't react, staring wide-eyed at the one that was still kneeling... and after Mo Huaiyang let go, Cao Weining collapsed to the side without a sound.

Mo Huaiyang hooded his eyes. "My Qingfeng Sword Sect, ever since its initiation by its founding master, has always assumed the duty of rectifying righteousness, and upholding the four virtues. Never before has a traitorous disciple come out of it. This Mo is ashamed that my instruction had not been to standard, to have produced such an unorthodox, unfilial one. I had no choice but to... tidy up the sect. In order to apologize to the world, I ask you all..."

Mo Huaikong looked at him incredulously. "I'll fuck you up!" he roared in rage.

The other paused for a short moment, then finished the rest of his words, no change in expression. "...to mock me."

Gu Xiang abruptly threw herself at him, looking to have gone insane. In that moment, her mind was a blank expanse, and she had only one thought left — kill.

"I'll kill you all!" she shrieked. "I'll kill every single one of you!"

Quick to react, Ye Baiyi darted over, then hand-chopped her gently on the back of her neck. Her body fell limply, and he caught her. Coldly sweeping his eyes across everyone in front of him, he ultimately settled onto Mo Huaiyang. “You all heard what she said.”

No one responded to him.

He nodded on his own, holding her atop the horse. “This humble one has gained insight,” he threw out, then left, kicking up no dust.

Gu Xiang was unconscious, but a tear still fell from the corner of her eye.

As it was... with the way this world worked, the righteous and the demonic could not coexist, nor have a nice chat. He was righteous, while she was demonic — they were destined to never be together. Those were the rules. Rules were set by majorities of the world’s people, and those who complied, yet wanted to rebel, had to have patience, throw caution to the wind, and bravely go against that overwhelming majority.

Succeed, and one could jump out. Fail, and...

Lao Meng had no idea that the things he had gotten ready were no longer needed. Surprisingly, he genuinely had prepped the ‘dowry’ Wen Kexing had asked for, filling up the ground of a courtyard with it in a way that had something of a ‘ten li worth of red adornments’ feel. Precious braziers for posterity, twin bowl sets for posterity, mahogany trunks, wardrobes, plus all sorts of makeup cases and jewelry boxes, implements of gold and silver in full gamut, and even a few sets of phoenix crowns and red dresses were all there.

Wen Kexing had gotten to his age without ever witnessing any sort of wedding, nor ever drinking a drop of wedding wine. He was learning for the first time that new brides were really so painstakingly cared for, browsing over it all with a lot of enthusiasm. He also purposefully held the ‘dowry art’¹⁸⁸ aloft, standing there and carefully studying it for a time, after which he came to a conclusion. “This artist is good, but not as good as the unique style of a friend of mine.”

Lao Meng was following ingratiatingly behind him. “Do you mean to have it switched out, Valley Master?” he quickly questioned.

Wen Kexing inclined his head to look at him, smiling falsely as he put the ‘art’ back, then randomly sat down upon a mahogany trunk nearby. “Do you know what phrase I just remembered?”

¹⁸⁸ It’s... erotica. You use it on the wedding night because virgins don’t know things... god fucking dammit priest, why did you make me talk about porn on this chapter??

The other's heart jumped, feeling that it wasn't going to be a good one.

However, he heard Wen Kexing say: "Taking off your pants to let out a fart is doing too much."

Lao Meng raised his head, gaze crossing with Wen Kexing's. A short moment later, he lowered it again. "This subordinate... does not understand what you mean, Valley Master."

Chapter 74 - War

Wen Kexing watched him silently, gaze like an awl, as if he was about to pierce into his core. Lao Meng suddenly felt a little panicked, automatically going over all his own mental calculations from start to finish.

Rebellion. He hadn't started planning for that only just recently, but for a long time beforehand. Back when Sun Ding and Xue Fang began to overtly and covertly fight, he had already started to scheme and prep. The Hanged Ghost pilfering the key, betraying the Valley, and leaving had practically been an opportunity given to him by the Heavens.

He still remembered how the man before him had gotten the position of Valley Master eight years back. He had merely been a young, unknown man that Lao Meng had never taken notice of, only thinking that the delicate-featured fellow being able to bring his little girl to live in a place like this was something rather amazing.

The former Valley Master of the time was dissimilar to the present one, and had honed in on flashiness. Yama Hall hadn't even been as desolate as it now was, frequently full of song and dance.

The old Master seemed to have appreciated him. In what way had he appreciated him, though? Lao Meng wasn't certain, as back in those years, no one had dared to say anything. Regardless, he had been transferred over to be a close attendant of Yama Hall, occasionally giving him pointers in martial arts when in a good mood. Wen Kexing would show up behind the Master from time to time, standing in a set spot, never speaking too much, and always following the rules, like a wooden man that didn't talk or move.

Yet, it was this wooden man that had, one night, set the insides of Yama Hall into a sky-soaring blaze, those organ-tearing, miserable screeches seeming to linger around its roofbeams for three days afterwards.

Silently bearing with it for three years, one half of the former Master's attendants went with him. Anybody that opposed would get rended apart, thrown into a fire, and roasted well the day of. Like so, killing a few would make the rest have no rebuke, no matter how stupid they were.

Xue Fang ate a maiden's heart every month, and Sun Ding liked to drink wine paired with human blood, but even they both thought that that night had been a nightmare. The blood within the Hall had looked to be smeared all over. The former Valley Master had howled for over two shichens. Some said that Wen Kexing had sliced him into pieces, staunching the bleeding all while he cut, then forced him to eat those pieces. Others said that he had skinned him, peeling him whole while he still lived.

When this man came out from inside, he had been wearing a bright red robe. At that moment, no one could tell whether it had been red to begin with, or had been dyed with fresh blood. His face, forever wooden and placid, had shown a smile for the first time before all.

“He’s dead. I got rid of him,” they had heard him say. “Anyone unconvinced can come fight me, but otherwise, be good and obey from here on out.”

After that came a war, a royale, a massacre... and then the dust finally settled.

There was no sort of conspiracy. This was exactly how to survive in the Valley — the strong were respected, and that was it. Wen Kexing trusted no one, except for the girl he had raised, so on his second day of being the Valley Master, he had immediately ordered for the extra people of Yama Hall to be cleared away. In the Valley, no living thing apart from Gu Xiang was allowed to come within three chi of him without permission.

He was temperamental, unreadable, and of ever-mysterious whereabouts.

Over those eight years, secrets got all the deeper. At times, Lao Meng would even get the illusion that the man, from the strands of his hair down to his fingernails, did not have a single area about him that wasn’t permeated with the horrific stench of blood; he was a through and through madman, born to slaughter. For that reason, Xue Fang and the rest preferred to fight amongst themselves before anything else, refusing to enrage the lunatic when their wings were not yet developed, and they still could not kill him in one blow.

Coming to this day... Lao Meng believed that he had since made proper preparations.

Everything was ready, except for one little thing.

Inside the Valley’s unrest, while the Ghost Master had wandered outside without return, Lao Meng had not remained idle. Now, he grasped control over seventy-percent of the Valley’s personnel. Even if this man truly did have three heads and six arms, even if he truly did have divine, peerless arts...

Zhao Jing was nothing to be worried about, as once he caught Xue Fang and got the key in his hand, he would have his goal. Thus, Lao Meng settled himself, then raised his head to meet Wen Kexing’s gaze. “Please give enlightenment, Valley Master,” he said, unworried.

The news of Zhao Jing’s group fighting beneath Fengya Mountain had not only reached Green Bamboo ridge, but had quickly been delivered to the Scorpion’s ears in that small town. In the middle of listening to a sixteen-year-old girl singing in a

teahouse, he frowned upon hearing this, feeling that this was an unexpectedly thorny issue.

The praying mantis hunted the cricket, only for a siskin to be behind it. But if the mantis shrank back at the approach of battle, quitting and putting down its claws, that would be a bother, too.

He pondered for a short moment, then spoke into the arrival's ear for a spell, who withdrew with their order.

Grabbing a handful of melon seeds, he ate them quite merrily while he kicked a nearby Poisonous Scorpion with his toes. "She sang well, so reward her... hm, the old guy playing the qin wasn't bad, either. Reward them both."

The girl thanked him for the money, helped up her grandpa that was shakily holding a huqin, and slowly left.

They went all the way to the outside of the door, after which the elder took out the majority of the money he had just been given and passed it to her. Once he opened his mouth, the voice that came out was extremely slow, hoarse, and aged. "Good child, take this and buy some snacks. Rest your throat well."

She refused it. "That won't do, mister. You've constantly been giving money to me these days, but what are you going to do, yourself?"

As it turned out, these two were not an actual grandparent-grandchild pair. "Cough, just take it, take it," the old man said, waving his hand. "I am an old one that has a today, but no tomorrow. Why should I demand payment? I can just scrape by with what I need. Your father is still sick, and can only come out to perform with you if he's cured quickly, yes? Furthermore, if it wasn't for your good singing, who would watch a decrepit elder like me play?"

Her face went red, as she really was pressed for cash. She stood there at a loss, not sure what she ought to do.

The elder didn't give her an opportunity to refuse it, turning to slowly leave with his huqin. As soon as he was somewhere that no one else was, the old man that looked to have a foot in the grave suddenly became invigorated. His muddled, slack gaze focused, brightening unusually, and his back straightened out — where was even a bit of that hobbling look at?

He was the Scorpion-tailing Zhou Zishu. When the Scorpion had lowered his voice to speak, bystanders couldn't have heard, but Zhou Zishu's strong hearing had caught it clearly. He was a tiny bit surprised; he hadn't expected that Zhao Jing's group would fight amongst themselves before even getting on the Mountain, which made the situation even more complicated. It signified that the minds of those inside that

formation weren't uniform, and that there might be many that each harbored their own motives, getting ready to do something rotten.

For the sake of compelling them to be on the same page, the Scorpion was sending his Scorpions to sneak-attack while pretending to be Ghost Valley's people. Zhou Zishu lightly furrowed his brow. He thought about Wen Kexing's circumstances in the Ridge right now, as recently, there had seemed to be an atypical calm in the Valley. That Wen trash hadn't... had anything happen to him, right?

He suddenly wanted to throw the Scorpion away and head straight for Fengya Mountain, but he was still Zhou Zishu, after all. That notion merely flashed past his brain, then was suppressed — the present gameboard was in chaos, and all the factions were already on it, aside from the Scorpion. Hastily mixing in with it would instead make him liable to be unclear on its shape, so it would be better to just follow said Scorpion.

That guy... since he had been the Ghost Valley Master for so many years yet still had all his limbs, he should generally have some capability.

Zhou Zishu unconsciously streaked his fingers across the strings of his huqin, making a faint sound, and then his figure disappeared into the alley.

The Scorpion had come prepared, getting more than thirty Scorpions to ambush Zhao Jing's group. Clearly, he had long been planning to fish in besieged waters, having no sort of good intentions... because those thirty had ghost-face tattoos patterned on them, the ink for which had been separately obtained from Lao Meng and Sun Ding. That was some real forward-thinking.

Zhao Jing's group had just endured many misfortunes. Mo Huaikong had nearly come to blows with Mo Huaiyang, only barely able to be held back. Everyone was unsettled, and then, all of a sudden, a group of uninvited guests arrived, catching them badly off-guard. The people in black, who had come out of who-knew-where, were extremely cunning, both battling and retreating, not getting rashly tangled up. If someone couldn't be beaten, they ran, but it wouldn't take them long to take advantage of someone's inattention to pop out again.

The scarred man took the clothes off one's corpse, exposing the ghost face that the Scorpion had deliberately made up beneath the crowd's staring eyes. Zhao Jing frowned, then looked at Mo Huaiyang. "Sect Leader Mo, the time is now. The problems between us should be discussed a bit later. We're all very sad over you losing your beloved disciple, but this is a period of life and death for the martial world. I hope that you'll weigh the situation at large!"

Mo Huaiyang thought about it. Feeling that he could not put on a rival stageplay to 'life and death of the martial world' for right now, he silently acquiesced to Zhao Jing's collaboration. The group of heroes that had dawdled for so long at the

mountain's base finally remembered what they were supposed to be doing, and with an order from Zhao Jing, they fought their way up the mountain.

In order to handle Wen Kexing, Lao Meng happened to have transferred the majority of his manpower to the vicinity of Yama Hall, practically allowing those warriors to enter a no-man's-land. The war, given a push by the Scorpion, had finally begun.

Behind Yama Hall, Wen Kexing was heavily surrounded. He grinned, thinking that Lao Meng really had a high evaluation of him, to confront his foe like so. Those beside him, once cowed by the Valley Master's might, had noticed the strife and changed sides — that was how Wen Kexing himself had killed the former Master.

In Ghost Valley, if there was no even match-up, and one side looked to be slightly weaker when viewing the scene, there would be a huge quantity of people immediately going turncoat. That was because 'loyalty' had never existed here, only the weak having no choice but to attach themselves to the strong, and once an even stronger person emerged, the one from before would no longer have use.

Wen Kexing swept a look at the bow and arrow in the hands of the person nearest, raising a brow at Lao Meng. "Xue Fang hasn't yet been found, and Zhao Jing is still at the mountain's base. With such troubles inside and out, you're still itching to take care of me first?"

He remained having no look of surprise or panic at all. Lao Meng's heart was getting increasingly bottomless, and he suddenly felt that the downmountain Zhao Jing and missing Xue Fang were both nothing compared to the man in front of him.

Right at that moment, a gray-clothed Ghost hurriedly barged in. "Zhao has brought people in for an attack!"

Lao Meng hadn't anticipated that Zhao Jing would settle his dilemma so quickly, instinctively sensing that something was off, yet having no time to think deeply on it. It was instead Wen Kexing who dragged out his voice, rueful, and with a lot of schadenfreude. "Oh, how awful. Is this not a fire burning the brows?"

Lao Meng scowled viciously, took in a deep breath, and waved his hand. The archers of the innermost surrounding layer looked at each other, then slowly lowered their arrows that had been aimed for Wen Kexing. Lao Meng cupped his hands at him, using the same deferential tone as ever. "Valley Master, now that the Valley has reached this plight, I believe that we should both take a step back and resolve the newcomers. We'll discuss this later, yes?"

Deal with the outsiders first, continue wrangling later; Lao Meng was worthy of being a bad egg, as once he had torn off his face, he would do away with sham politeness and just be forthcoming.

Wen Kexing crossed his arms over his chest, looking as gentle as a spring breeze. “I’m a general that’s fallen in rank to a prisoner of war. What else can I possibly say?”

The corner of the other’s eye twitched. With a motion of his hand, he made a path. “If you please, Valley Master.”

Ye Baiyi hadn’t senselessly gone to get mixed up with them, as he wasn’t interested. All he did was place Gu Xiang on his horse’s back, steering the horse, bearing Dragon’s Back, and holding the small jar while he slowly went in the opposite direction. After a non-great amount of time, she woke up. Without shifting, she got up on her own, dazed for a minute, then turned to lay her back on the horse. Gazing at the sky, the horse’s bumpy steps seemed to make the Heavens jolt as well.

She stared and stared. Tears dampened the hair at her temples, but she seemed to not feel them.

He looked back at her, reining his horse as he found it hard to keep quiet. “Dry your tears.”

She bit her lip. “I’m not crying,” she whispered.

Even though she had said that, her tears seemed to be deliberately acting against her. They fell, track after track. She raised her hand and wiped them off, then wiped them once more, but no matter what, she couldn’t wipe them clean away, only able to unconsciously rub at them again and again.

Ye Baiyi hadn’t anything to say to such a young girl to begin with, so he had no idea what to do upon seeing her like this. After a half day of thought, he said stiffly, “How about we go back and fetch your lover’s corpse.”

He had been trying to console her, but her tears only fell all the harder.

Since that didn’t work, he frowned. “Don’t cry. Everyone dies, or... what are you thinking of doing?”

Gu Xiang abruptly sat up, jumped off the horse, then buried her face in her sleeves, as if she was about to suffocate herself to death on them. A while later, she looked back up. “Zhou Xu and them are at an inn in the outskirts of Luoyang. Go find him.”

With that, she turned and left.

He got off to stop her. “Where are you going? You can’t defeat that guy. I’d advise you to—“

Not looking back, she stubbornly straightened out her back, then bounded for Fengya Mountain, vanishing without a trace.

Ye Baiyi subconsciously lifted his hand, placing it upon the tiny Writ pendant on his chest. Being speechless for a short time, his horse simultaneously got a bit impatient and rubbed against his graying hair, which seemed to only then bring him back to his senses. He sighed, lowered his head to look at the jar, then mounted the horse again. "Ah, Changqing. I'll find that unfilial son of yours for you," he said to himself. "Don't worry. I'll have someone bring him home for you, too."

Chapter 75 - Finale (I)

Zhao Jing's horse was in the lead as he brought them up Fengya Mountain. "No need to worry, everyone," he shouted. "The evil Ghosts are no better than..."

His voice suddenly trailed off, and he appeared apprehensive as he raised his head to look in Yama Hall's direction. He saw a group of Ghosts in gray file out; they made no noise when they walked, as if their feet never hit the ground, partitioned by air. Both sides stood solemnly. A ghost-faced banner silently rose, billowing viciously in the wind, the hazy, setting sun dying it a blood-like color.

A tall, jade-like man donning long, dark red robes stood on the other side. Hands encased inside his spacious sleeves, his head was down, and he had some inattentiveness, as though he was in a daze whilst he viewed something unknown.

With a raise of his hand, everyone stopped in their tracks along with Zhao Jing, hemming in on observing the man. Looking at the environs, Lao Meng was standing a little further in, nearly overlooked by others while the man in red drew in all gazes. Like he had been disturbed, the latter slowly turned around, allowing them to get a vivid view.

"It's you?!" Zhao Jing cried out.

Wen Kexing raised his brow. "Ah, Hero Zhao. It's been a while," he answered softly.

He had seen Wen Kexing not just once before this, but on this meeting, he felt like the soul inside the other's shell had been switched out. No matter how he viewed him, he looked grotesque, making him slightly aghast. Wen Kexing slowly descended the stone stairs, and it seemed like every step forward he took had a compelling pressure. Zhao Jing involuntarily took a step back, thereafter forcing himself to bear with it. "You... you're the..."

Wen Kexing gave a mn. "My trifling, untalented self is indeed that evil-filled boss of the Ghosts that everyone's been talking about," he explained, very understanding of the other's emotions. "I hope everybody can forgive me for all that disrespect from before."

Zhao Jing had witnessed his moves a few times and knew that his martial arts were decent, yet still wasn't taking such a young man seriously in any way, merely feeling that something was off about this situation. Before he could think deeply on that, however, someone leapt into the air behind him. "You're a bastard just pretending to be powerful!" he shouted.

With no time to stop him, Zhao Jing only caught sight of that elder being one of Qingfeng Sword Sect's 'Huai' generation, Mo Huaifeng. Zhao Jing's thoughts turned

around; he knew that because of what had happened with Cao Weining, Mo Huaikong had turned back before the fight. This was Mo Huaiyang scouting for dignity by putting a half-hand out, then quietly shrinking back with the intention to observe from a safe spot.

Mo Huaifeng didn't care that he was possibly being taken advantage of for being lower in rank. Not being polite with anybody, he drew out his longsword, then went for Wen Kexing like a storm. In front of everyone's eyes, the red-clothed man went down the steps as casually as ever, not dodging, looking as if even the width between each of his steps was invariable. Then, all of a sudden, Mo Huaifeng let out a heart-splitting scream, and his entire body collapsed to one side.

Wen Kexing's hands were still hung parallel to him, the smile he had completely unchanged. Zhao Jing hadn't even seen how he had moved.

Mo Huaifeng fell to the ground, twitching all over non-stop. A couple of gray Ghosts standing nearby shifted to encircle him, eager excitement showing on their faces, yet they dared not to move, only peering at Wen Kexing impatiently.

The latter inclined his head towards them. "It's already gotten to this hour," he said, softly. "Why are you still being polite?"

Zhao Jing and the rest didn't understand his implication, at first. In the wake of his command, the Ghosts surrounding Mo Huaifeng suddenly shrieked inhumanly, then pounced on the man that was unable to resist like a bunch of children massing together to play with a bug. In no more than a blink of the eye, Mo Huaifeng was torn apart, his entire body cut into pieces — he could not possibly be more dead.

Blood sprayed out beautifully, one zhang high. Zhao Jing's pupils shrank.

These were actual evil Ghosts!

At that moment, Wen Kexing was already standing three stone steps away from him. Zhao Jing could finally no longer put on a brave front, recoiling one huge step back as he held his weapon horizontal to his chest. "You... you actually dared to..."

"I don't think you understand yet, Hero Zhao," the other began, sounding like a soft breeze and fine rain. "Exit Green Bamboo Ridge, and it's the human world. Upon coming to said world, you must properly act like a human. For instance, if a child suffers bullying by others, you save them. If a beauty is unhappy, you console them. If someone gives food, you give them coin. If you see someone in trouble, you lend a hand. What is all that? ...It's being human. But, when we're all here, there are no humans. And the act of conducting oneself like one..."

He stopped, then turned to glance back at the Ghosts that had just been stained with blood, yet were still eager to move. Laughing, he stretched out a finger, then

wagged it twice before Zhao Jing's eyes. "Contend with us, and you're bound to die, because we don't have elders, children, men, or women. Here, there are only malevolent ghosts that want lives."

He coolly raised his hand, lightly stirring his sleeve, and looked at their group condescendingly. "Oh, would you look at that. There hasn't been any visitors to the Valley in many years, so I got excited and talked a lot. In what way are you hallowed, Hero Zhao? That one hadn't conducted himself like a human would at all; do you need me to bring up the reason for that? Tell me: yes, or no?"

Mo Huaiyang stepped forth, standing abreast of Zhao Jing with an unsightly expression. "Alone, we won't be the opponents of this monster," he whispered into his ear. "We'll act together."

Zhao Jing was having trouble getting off the tiger he was riding. His gaze jumped over Wen Kexing to see Lao Meng standing a bit behind the main gate of Yama Hall, along with the cryptic look he had, and inwardly understood the other's likely plan; this was killing two eagles with one arrow. Right now, he no longer had any means of retreat, so he had no choice but to toughen up, let out a roar of fury, and lunge.

That was akin to a signal, which the two parties standing opposite received simultaneously. The brawl began.

Meanwhile, the Scorpion had already detoured around to the other end of Fengya. He looked up to gaze at the rolling, verdant mountains. "Beautiful," he mumbled, "really beautiful. Fengya Mountain is one of the most stunning views in the human world. What a pity... that this is a prickly beauty that can only be observed from a distance, not played around with. Do you think it looks good?"

The one he asked was a masked Poisonous Scorpion beside him, who followed his line of sight, then looked like he had just received some kind of assignment. "Yes!"

The smile on the Scorpion's face curbed by half. "You're really no fun."

"Yes!" the other said again.

It was like the guy could only say one word. The Scorpion's interest in sightseeing vanished, face cooling down. "They should have already set to task. We'll go up now, and be right in time to reap the benefits — my client, Lao Meng, spent a lot of money, so he's waiting to coordinate with me from the inside."

"Yes!" the other said yet again.

The Scorpion ignored him, beginning to walk forward on his own. The well-trained Scorpions immediately followed after; whether they were a group of real people, or a big bunch of puppets, was practically unknowable.

After a period of walking, a gray blur flashed over in front of them. The black-clothed Scorpions revealed their hooks, only to be stopped by the Scorpion. The Ghost craftily swept his eyes around in a circle at the dark crowd, and, likely not having swept to any conclusion, turned to the Scorpion. “Mister Impermanence asked me to receive you, Scorpion Master. If you please.”

The Scorpion smiled with a half-bow. “Thanks for your trouble.”

...To be blunt, this was what it was to let a wolf into your own house.

The sky gradually darkened. Before Yama Hall, reality resembled the unending netherworld; corpses were piling up, shouts and screams rose and fell, and, regardless of whether they were a ghost or a human, no one could wield their personal sense of integrity. As soon as the fracas had started, none were able to keep a hold on the situation, and even the hiding Lao Meng had quickly gotten dragged into it.

Wen Kexing’s dark red robes had now changed to the utmost of bright, his face that could be described as handsome splattered entirely with bloodstains. It wasn’t clear whether those were from himself or someone else, but he didn’t appear to know what exhaustion and pain were, not looking the tiniest bit tense. Using his fingers, he gently wiped off his browbone, uncovering a pair of eyes whose blacks and whites were in stark contrast. As if he was in some sort of majestic ceremony, he faintly held a crazed, yet at-ease smile.

It was unknown how long this battle had been fought. Zhao Jing could feel his heart hammering like thunder, wave after wave of blackness coming before his eyes, but he firmly grit his teeth and bore with it. Then, he caught sight of Wen Kexing’s smiling visage, and got a chill, sensing that the man wasn’t wanting to kill him immediately. Like a vicious beast catching its tiny prey, he wanted to have fun playing with him before he’d be willing to take a vicious bite.

Zhao Jing hollered and threw himself over once again, sabre hacking towards Wen Kexing’s chest — a wide open, and a wide close, such as how a river would flow into the sea. This was one of his signature moves. The veins in his hands swelled with true qi, looking like they were about to burst.

A life-saving gambit, and also a life-toying gambit.

It was a strike as exacting as lightning, made with all-out strength and an immense momentum that could cleave mountains and oceans. Wen Kexing gave a small gasp, seemingly a bit surprised; even with his skill, he couldn’t dodge it entirely. Frowning slightly, he could only turn his body to the side to keep his vitals away, then brace himself as he doggedly resisted the blade with the flesh of his shoulder. Its edge cut horizontally into it, and Zhao Jing spat out a mouthful of blood, both in extreme pain and wild joy.

However, he could not take a step further to follow it up. Wen Kexing grasped his sabre's blade with both hands, after which a massive force shook Zhao Jing off of it. He stumbled a step back, retreating desperately, but with no real support, he collapsed onto the ground.

Before his eyes was darkness. The mountains turned upside down, and there was an incessant rumbling in his ears — a single hand then gripped his throat, and his entire body was lifted upwards. He fought to open his eyes wide, meeting with the other's gaze.

“Take a good look at me,” he heard Wen Kexing say. “Everyone always says that I look just like my father. Has my appearance gone awry over these years? Or is your conscience so burdened with guilt, you're too afraid to acknowledge it?”

Zhao Jing stared at him vacantly for a long time. All of a sudden, he violently began to struggle.

Wen Kexing slowly sucked in a breath, then sighed. “You went so long without recognizing me, that I was under the impression that I might have thought wrong, haha... Hero Zhao, thirty years ago, Long Que and one other bore their sins and fled after witnessing Rong Xuan kill his own wife. Madam Rong had passed the key off to that someone. There were only three people on scene, then; Madam Rong died, and Long Que never said who the other one was all the way until his death. Yet, the location of the key was leaked, and it got to the point that a married couple withdrew from jianghu to live incognito in a small mountain village, terrified, for over ten years, hiding away from the world, yet unable to hide from the evil Ghosts. What went on with that?”

Zhao Jing only felt bursts of acute pain in his insides. With his throat blocked, it couldn't take in a single breath, and he vainly tried to use his hands to break away Wen Kexing's iron-like fingers, eyes starting to roll up into the back of his head.

“After he came back from the dead, Rong Xuan's personality had greatly changed,” Wen Kexing soliloquized. “But could that have gotten to the extent that he wouldn't be able to distinguish friend from foe, and ruthlessly kill his own wife — and so easily? Even a rabid dog would still recognize its owner... so who did all that, then? Who was it that had interrogated Madam Rong about the arsenal key, then killed her when he had no need of her? Who had escaped in a panic because someone else was coming, and who hid away somewhere secret, knowing everything that had happened? Who was so talentless, that he sold out the whereabouts of Wen Ruyu and his wife...?”

The other was no longer moving. Wen Kexing's eyes were blank. Seemingly unaware of what night it was, he released his hand, allowed the man's body to fall noisily to the ground, then stood there absently for a time.

Right then, Mo Huaiyang decisively snatched this opportunity to launch a sneak-attack from behind. Hearing the sound of wind, Wen Kexing startled, forcing himself to set his qi into motion — but Zhao Jing's sabre was still stuck in his shoulder, and he couldn't dredge any up!

At the same time, a light swish was heard, and a high-flying knife swept over, its strike slanting Mo Huaiyang's sword away. A monstrous-looking maiden coldly stood before him. "I told you before," she said, dragging her words out, "that I'm going to kill you."

Wen Kexing was stunned for a good while. "Ah-Xiang?"

Due to that nickname, her ice-cold expression could no longer be maintained, tears falling down it. She slowly turned to him, squeezing out a smile. "You can keep the dowry, Master," she whispered. "Brother... Brother Cao, he..."

After that, her voice choked off, and she flung her head away in order to not look at him, like if she couldn't see him, she wouldn't seem weak, or aggrieved.

A scream thereafter sounded through the air. Lao Meng shut his eyes, giving off a relaxed smile — that was the Scorpion arriving. He knew that his victory was secure. Upon opening his eyes once more, the chilling light in them sharply rose, because right now, Wen Kexing had his back to him.

With a light raise of his hand, a cluster of cold glints shot out of his sleeve.

Gu Xiang noticed that her eyes were getting stung by something before her tears were yet dry. She suddenly leapt forth and tackled Wen Kexing, the two of them getting thrown down to the ground together.

Wen Kexing's eyes went wide. This moment might have been only a single second's time, but to him, it felt as long as a passing eternity.

He lifted the hand that he had subconsciously placed on her back when they fell. It was dripping with fresh blood — the girl's entire back looked like something had exploded it open. He nearly believed that he had just been touching bone and viscera.

"Ah... Xiang?"

Her head was on his chest. Forcefully lifting it up, she gave him a smile, breath like gossamer. "Master, I said I was going to kill him, but that was a bluff. I don't... have the skill... kill him for me, I'm begging you... kill him... for me."

He nodded woodenly. Gu Xiang looked pained, and she felt aching, cold all over. It was like all of her warmth was pouring out of her back. She had to hold tightly onto

his lapels, like a little girl. “It’s f-fine if I die... Brother Cao definitely would have wanted me to live well... but I... I’m not going to... be able to... Master...”

Wen Kexing covered her head with his bloodied hand. “Don’t call me Master,” he said, gentle. “Call me gege.”

She attempted to force a smile, but failed. No longer obeying her, her limbs began to spasm, and her eyes gradually unfocused. “Gege, you have to... kill him... for me...”

Lao Meng, still fearful of Wen Kexing, had immediately retreated when his attack had missed.

Wen Kexing slowly got up, laying Gu Xiang’s body out flat, then reached up and firmly pulled Zhao Jing’s sabre out of his shoulder. Half of his body was numb, no strength able to be put into it, but the malevolent qi about him grew even heavier.

“Alright. I’ll kill him for you,” he said, as if talking to himself.

Mo Huaiyang had noticed that things were inauspicious, and, more slippery than a loach, had since fled. Wen Kexing’s gaze swept across the crowd. With his still-usable hand, he snatched a Ghost in gray. “You saw the man with the sword that had just been standing next to Zhao, yes?”

A gurgling noise came from the Ghost’s throat as he shakily pointed at a direction.

Wen Kexing smiled. “Thanks much.”

His fingers then pressed in hard, and the Ghost’s head instantly broke apart into a pile of messy flesh.

Chapter 76 - Finale (II)

Lord Seventh was in a restaurant, cup of tea in hand as he messed with a heap of sticks on the table. He looked serious, as if his divinings were actually reliable.

Smiling slightly, the Great Shaman sat quietly across from him, feeling extraordinarily calm and delighted as he watched him amuse himself.

However, he heard the other gasp a bit. “This divining... looks a bit interesting.”

“Why?”

Lord Seventh side-eyed him. “Don’t you think me to be inaccurate?”

The other smiled. “When did I ever say that?”

“I gave you a palm reading in the capital ten years ago, but you, as a little brat, said that I was full of nonsense and didn’t even come close,” Lord Seventh answered, counting on his fingers.

The Great Shaman’s eyes curved, showing a bit of a nostalgic expression. “Right, I remember. You said that my bond-signifying heaven-line is long and deep, I’m an infatuated person, and my journey of love will be anything-goes, with great luck and benefits,” he continued, gentle. “You also said that the one I admired was a staunchly loyal woman. I didn’t believe you then, but looking back on it, you actually got it pretty much right. Except for the ‘woman’ part.”

Lord Seventh was taken aback, eyebrows twitching, then seemed to somewhat bashfully lower his head to drink his tea and vainly avoid the other’s gaze. “You remember that pretty clearly, punk,” he mumbled.

Wu Xi laughed. “You divined for Manor Lord Zhou and the rest? What did it say?”

The other paused, his lowered eyes gliding over the sticks again. “One placed within a land of death will fight for their survival. The shape of the divination says...”

He appeared to want to go on and on about this, but upon getting up to there, he unexpectedly trailed off, smile falling. He tilted his head to see down the stairs. The Great Shaman followed his line of sight, only to see a man come in through the door.

He furrowed his brow, as well. The man... had something indescribable about him. He had a head of white hair, a heavy sword on his back, and a small jar in his hand. The instant he entered, the scarce amount of people inside the restaurant all seemed to pause, gazes drawn to him.

As if sensing something, the man looked up to cross gazes with the Great Shaman.

The latter's eyes focused in, and he let out a small exclamation. "That's the Ancient Blade of the Dragon's Back," he muttered. "This man..."

The arrival was Ye Baiyi. After a stop in his tracks, he suddenly went straight for the two. "Is a guy named Zhou Xu staying here?" he asked.

Lord Seventh sized him up, thoughts turning around and around. "You are... Ye Baiyi?"

Ye Baiyi nodded, sitting next to them without any bit of politeness. "I'm looking for him."

"He's tailing the Poisonous Scorpions to Fengya Mountain. You can wait here for him, or I can relay anything you have to say to him."

The other looked him up and down, thinking about it. "Are you the one the Cao kid said could treat that brat, Zhou Xu?"

Lord Seventh pointed at the Great Shaman. "That'd be him."

Ye Baiyi's eyes landed on the latter, slightly inquiring. The Great Shaman was only looking at his white hair. "This is the result of the real 'six harmonies mental cultivation', right?"

Turning his head, he saw Lord Seventh looking intrigued, and patiently explained it to him. "One that practices the six harmonies has only two paths; they either qi deviate, or reach the pinnacle, having the alleged arts of being one with the Heavens, unable to construct without destruction."

Ye Baiyi sneered. "There are no 'arts of being one with the Heavens' in this world. If humanity and the Heavens weren't separate from each other, living would be of no interest."

The Great Shaman gave him a look. "This cultivation method has reached the top tier, and can be stated to be divine arts that are unparalleled in the world, to the extent that one won't age or die. However, it has a flaw in that one can never eat warm things from that point on, needing to drink snow water and cold food when passing their days."

As he said that, Lord Seventh's eyes went to Ye Baiyi. The latter was in the middle of very casually rinsing out a cup and then pouring himself some hot tea, which he delivered to his mouth. "With your strength, you shouldn't have a head full of white hair, nor an aura of death," the Great Shaman said, also watching him.

“That’s been caused by you leaving the extreme cold of Changming Mountain and eating the food of ordinary humans, isn’t it?”

Ye Baiyi stiffly pulled up the corners of his mouth into a smile. “You’ll understand once you live to my age, kid — dying after a year of being a living human is much better than continuing to be the living dead for centuries in that place.”

The Great Shaman shook his head. “I’m perfectly alive. I also don’t practice martial arts for turning into the living dead.”

Ye Baiyi paid no mind to his lack of courtesy, merely gazing at the liquid in the cup like he was viewing someplace far away through it, eyes twinkling. It was a long time before he spoke. “Many years ago, a friend of mine had a setback in his martial practice. I wanted to save him, but didn’t have the skills you do, so there was only one road to take. Afterwards, he felt sorry, and brought his wife with him to accompany me in seclusion on Changming. There’s a ruined temple there that people off the mountain have no clue about, and believe that an immortalized monk lives inside.”

As he spoke, it seemed like he had been hiding these words for too long, unable to keep himself from grabbing everything and pouring it out before two strangers he had met by coincidence. He thought about how if he didn’t say more now, there would likely be no other chance for him to say it in his lifetime.

“That friend was a hard-hearted one, but actually had no sense. Their family of three frolicked in front of me all day long, and I hated those eyesores... I taught his kid martial arts, but at some point, the brat started having thoughts about the six harmonies. His mother wasn’t a stupid woman, but... she was a mother, after all.”

Saying as much, he shook his head despondently. “I wasn’t thinking, either. If something was good, why couldn’t I give it to him? I treated him like my own...”

He couldn’t continue, only sighing.

“The Writ of the World once appeared thirty years ago,” the Great Shaman took over. “You are Rong Xuan’s shifu?”

“That’s me.” Ye Baiyi nodded. “Not long after I had come down the mountain, I sought out Qin Huaizhang, the former Lord of Four Seasons Manor, to follow the kid’s trail. Back then, though, the Manor’s wings weren’t filled out yet, so its power was limited; all he found was Rong Xuan’s corpse, and the thing about the five families’ descendants and the Lapis Armor was vaguely touched upon. The investigation later got cut short, owing to my friend, Changqing... he felt that he had let me down, and was suddenly suffering the pain of mourning his own son. Sickesses of the heart are difficult to treat... he was near death.”

The Great Shaman nodded. “So, that was Senior Rong Changqing.” He thereafter turned his head to fill Lord Seventh in. “Senior Rong used to be called ‘Ghost Hand’, and was a famed craftsman of his generation. Great Famine, which you gave to the child, and the flexible sword, which you gave to Manor Lord Zhou, were both made by him.”

Ye Baiyi’s face was as stiff as ever, but his mouth raised into a smile. He grazed the rim of his teacup with his fingers. “That’s him. That flexible sword is actually the ‘Sword of No Name’. Since it had no name, it changed to ‘Baiyi’ after it got to my hands, but that Zhou guy didn’t recognize the goods he had. He likely still hasn’t learned, either.”

“In the years since... Elder Rong’s death, have you had to face Madam Rong day and night?” Lord Seventh suddenly asked.

The other’s smile suddenly turned somewhat bitter. “Yeah. Changqing is dead, so I don’t know why she still keeps me company in immortality, in that place that’s a coffin for the living. I don’t have anything to say to her, either. Typically, I just practice my arts while she lives her own life. At the start, she could nod or exchange empty pleasantries with me, but later on... later on, we came to be mutually silent. Thinking about it, I haven’t said a word to her in over a decade.”

Lord Seventh took a divination stick and lightly struck it against his teacup, not saying a word.

Ye Baiyi drank down the rest of his tea in one gulp, stood up, and placed the small jar he held onto the tabletop. “I’m not going back. Since you lot are going to go to Changming with that Zhou guy, help me out by bringing Rong Xuan and his wife with. Their family of four can go on by themselves.”

Now done speaking, he turned to leave. Lord Seventh suddenly called out to stop him. “Have you still not let him go after all these years, Brother Ye?”

The man turned back to look at him. “I never held him to begin with. How could I let him go?”

With that, he departed in strides, sword on his back.

I’ve finally returned your son to you, Changqing. Your family can reunite, and Dragon’s Back will accompany me. In our next lives... we won’t be seeing each other in the world.

If not home, where shall I go today?¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ From ‘Courtyard Full of Fragrance’, by Su Shi.
<https://m.kekenet.com/kouyi/201502/360180.shtml>

Meanwhile, on Fengya Mountain, a group suddenly showed up right when everybody was equally exhausted. It was as if they had dropped down from the sky. Their leader was a young man dressed in silks, and behind him was a trailing black mass of Poisonous Scorpions.

Right then, the scarred man that had been by Zhao Jing's side suddenly came out and knelt down on one knee. "Master," he called out to the Scorpion.

What a shame that Zhao Jing was already dead, else he would have no idea what to do in this situation. The Scorpion nodded, gaze sweeping across the area; with full satisfaction, he discovered that out of his three customers — Zhao Jing, Sun Ding, and Lao Meng — two-and-a-half out of three were now dead. All that remained was Lao Meng's bloodied half-self, who was looking at him ecstatically with a face of relief.

The Scorpion laughed coldly. "I trust every hero here has been well since our last meeting," he stated in a peculiar tone.

The smile on Lao Meng's face stagnated. He looked on as the Scorpion waved his hand, and then as the black-clothed Scorpions filed up to encircle the entire scene. "What is the meaning of this, Scorpion Master?" he raged.

The other grinned. "I'm collecting my interest."

Following that, he laughed crisply and loudly, feeling that on this earth, no one was superior to him. Regardless of whether one was of the righteous or demonic faction, they would die while he would live, and none of them could get out of the scope of his manipulations.

He was so overly self-confident, that he didn't realize that one of the Scorpions he had brought with him wasn't conforming.

The day before the Scorpions had moved out, Zhou Zishu had snatched an opportunity to become one by substituting for another. He was taking a risk, but luckily, the Scorpion's desire for control was so strong, his people normally said nothing other than 'yes'. He had been intending to be close to the Scorpion so that he could easily deal with him when the time came, yet, upon coming to the scene and surveying it, he didn't see Wen Kexing's figure at all!

Noiselessly, like an invisible man, he had mixed in with the Scorpions without batting an eye, gaze searching about all over the place. All of a sudden, his eyes widened as he caught sight of a familiar figure behind a huge boulder. It was... Gu Xiang?

His heart jumped rapidly. In the span of a second, all sorts of scenarios streaked across his mind; why was Gu Xiang here? She got injured? Where was Wen Kexing?

He took a deep breath, forcefully controlled himself, and carefully withdrew from the crowd. After slipping behind the boulder, he slowly leaned over, stood there rigidly for a minute, then stooped over to gently search for breath beneath the girl's nose using his hand. He knew that there was no logic behind such an action — her body was already cold, that ever-smiling face no longer having any life to it.

A long while later, he straightened back up, then let out a breath that had been stuffed up tight in his chest. Savagely tearing both the mask and disguise off of his face, he thought to himself, Damn it all, where did Wen Kexing go?

At this same exact time, the Scorpion had finished gloating, and then couldn't help but be startled. He had also realized that the Ghost Valley Master wasn't present.

The Hanged Ghost still hadn't shown up at this point, and the Ghost Master was nowhere to be seen. A dark cloud seemed to be covering the Scorpion's head.

The more he thought, the more disquieted he was. Increasingly feeling that the remainder of those left here were nothing to be worried about, he thus called a Scorpion over, ordered such and such from him, and then went to search Fengya Mountain himself with the rest.

If he did not watch the one he was fearful of die in front of him, it would forever be hard for him to be at ease.

Mo Huaiyang believed himself to have escaped. He had fled more than half a shichen away from Fengya before he sighed in relief, yet, all of a sudden, a burst of rustling noises came to his ears. He quickly lifted his head up, then immediately took a huge step backwards in fright.

Wen Kexing was like the King of Hell come to life. His pace was slow as he exited the other end of the forest. In one of his hands was a sword he had picked up from some unknown dead person, and its tip dragged as he walked over, step by step.

“Sect Leader Mo,” he said. “This humble one was entrusted with seeing you off on your journey, if you please.”

With every step he took, his tattered sleeves trailed on the ground, leaving thin traces of blood behind them. His walking posture was a bit off, as if he was stubbornly hauling along half of his immobile body. While he was speaking, a minute wound on his face had split open to seep once more, and he lightly lapped up the blood that fell from it, still approaching.

Mo Huaiyang gritted his teeth. He knew that Wen Kexing was an arrow nearing the end of its trajectory — was the Ghost Valley Master a god? The other had been besieged by several experts, solo, for several shichens, then had been stabbed by Zhao

Jing prior to his death. Anyone else would have fainted long ago, so he didn't believe that the man was capable of doing much.

Even with those thoughts, though, his calves still slightly shook.

Wen Kexing tilted his head to the side, chuckling. Mo Huaiyang suddenly roared madly, and the Qingfeng Sword once held by Sect Leaders past was unsheathed. Exerting everything he had learned in his entire life, he made a maneuver that was airtight.

The other also made a move. One of his hands was useless, which made the action very sluggish, and his worn-out sword was turned into several pieces by Qingfeng. Mo Huaiyang was delighted, turning his hand around to pare off the arm with the ruined sword, but there was only an afterimage left of the one in front of him, and then, he was gone.

Mo Huaiyang mentally exclaimed that this wasn't good, and in the next second, there was a chill on his neck. His entire body froze.

Wen Kexing's broken chunk of sword was stuck in his throat, ice-cold fingers seeming to bump up against his skin. The man sighed. "I'm out of strength," he whispered.

Immediately after that, he pushed his hand forward, and blood spurted far out of Mo Huaiyang's neck. The latter convulsed all over as he collapsed, making gurgling noises from his throat. Soon, his blood all drained away, and he stopped moving.

Wen Kexing appeared to be unable to keep on standing. He stumbled, then miserably fell into a sit on the ground. I'm sorry, Ah-Xiang, he vacantly thought, for allowing him to die so quickly.

Ah-Xiang. What an aggravating little girl... for more than ten years, he had lived in darkness, no daylight. The sole living thing that had accompanied him was now gone.

Footsteps sounded out from not too far away, and then a familiar voice was heard to speak. "No wonder I hadn't seen you, Valley Master. Turns out you're just here, cooling off in the shade."

Wen Kexing felt that he ought to stand up, kill this man, and then keep on living, but he didn't have one bit of power to muster up. All he could sense was weariness. Mutely turning his head, he looked at the Scorpion and his ill-intentioned grin.

After twenty years of bearing with humiliation for the sake of his goals, and everything he had been wanting to do now being accomplished... was he going to die here?

Chapter 77 - Finale (III)

In spite of Wen Kexing's tragic, powerless appearance, the Scorpion still stood two zhang apart from him, beaming and clucking his tongue. "How unexpected, how unexpected."

Wen Kexing was still able to force out a smile. "What's unexpected?" he asked lightly.

The Scorpion shook his head. "Ghost Master, no matter how impressive and capable one is, when they fall into such a plight... who can say how the ways of the world go for certain?"

The other sucked in a breath that only seemed to reach his chest, making his answer very feeble. "How wrong you are, Brother Scorpion. I've been the Ghost Master for eight years, yet have never had one day of peaceful sleep. What's so 'impressive' there?"

The Scorpion pondered this, then nodded. "You're right. People like us don't get the happy, worry-free lives that commonfolk do."

Looking at this extraordinary, uncommon man, Wen Kexing smiled. "I dare not compare myself to your world-encompassing ability, Brother Scorpion. Me being unable to sleep well was only because I was afraid that someone else would kill me. Now... there's finally no need for me to be scared anymore."

"That's true," the Scorpion said with a nod. "You're about to die, so there's naturally no need for you to fear death."

"Lao Meng... you killed him?" Wen Kexing suddenly asked.

The man laughed mockingly. "If I didn't kill him, wouldn't I just be waiting around for him to kill me first, then? That was your devoted old servant, Ghost Master, but he still wholeheartedly wanted you to die. Why trouble yourself with keeping him on your mind?"

Wen Kexing nodded at that. "How many... are left alive in the Valley?"

The Scorpion felt that this guy had way too many hang-ups, but replied anyways. "Do you need to ask? Zhao got rid of half, and the remaining half of the injured ranks inevitably fell into my hands. How unthinkable of you to be so magnanimous. You have no time to look after yourself, yet are still worried over the lives and deaths of the Valley's people. Out of successive generations of Ghost Masters... you really are the most affectionate and loyal one."

Wen Kexing silently laughed. His expression was somewhat bizarre, but he still sounded calm. "Evil Ghosts on the verge of death are still Ghosts. They likely weren't easy to deal with."

"There are those amongst my men that are suicide warriors," the Scorpion answered, not concerned in the least. "A couple hundred of them dying isn't much. Nor do I care."

"Okay," Wen Kexing said, shutting his eyes. "You're very driven and bold in style, Brother Scorpion. You deserve to be the formidable figure of a generation... ah, Lao Meng. The most tragic thing about him is none other than the fact that despite clearly being on the board, he still believed himself to be the one holding the pawns. Laughable, isn't it?"

His lips could barely be seen to move on those last few words, which were almost difficult to hear. Seeing this, the Scorpion looked to be reassured, and he stepped forward a bit. "Of course. You're someone that's open-minded, Ghost Master... hand me your hook."

As soon as he put his hand out, someone placed a weapon onto it. He restrained his grin as he looked at Wen Kexing, who was leaning against a tree and already finding it challenging to move. "Someone like you should be done in by my own hands. Using another for this would be rather rude."

While he spoke, he raised the hook horizontally across his chest, then slowly came forwards. "Please go on ahead to Yellow Spring Road, Ghost Master."

He then raised the hook up high. Wen Kexing opened his pitch-black eyes, gazing at him calmly; there looked to be pools of stagnant water inside them. It was like the one that was going to die was not him.

All of sudden, the Scorpion felt a strong gale attacking him from the side. Its intent to kill was much too prominent, and all of his hairs were made to stand on end from that murderous aura. With a loud shout, he hefted the hook even higher to obstruct it. The new arrival was a black-clothed man dressed as a Poisonous Scorpion, yet with no mask, and the flexible sword he held dodged past the hook to unshakably wind around the Scorpion's arm — the man screamed as said arm was swept up, after which it fell clean away from him.

The few Poisonous Scorpions behind him promptly and obediently came forth in reaction. All that was heard was a spell of clanging noises, and seen was an eye-dazzling display. In a wink's time, the dust settled; one stood alone while several laid, and every one of the latter was missing their weapon-wielding arm, whether they were even alive or not.

Wen Kexing got a clear view of the newcomer, only to sigh. “Idiot,” he whispered. “Why did you come here?”

Zhou Zishu shot him a glance out of the corner of his eye, smiling coldly. “I came to collect your corpse, you loon.”

The Great Shaman’s medicine had suppressed the Seven Acupunctures nails, and Zhou Zishu’s skill was now reinstated to about ninety-percent of its peak period. Even if he fought alone and out in the open, there was no way the Scorpion would be his match, to say nothing of what he had just done being classified as a sneak attack.

Zhou Zishu turned to him, the tip of his Baiyi sword slightly hanging, voice slightly harsh. “You dare act against who’s mine?”

Wen Kexing stared blankly at the back that was blocking his sight. His fingers that were dangling down to the ground faintly began to tremble.

The Scorpion’s complexion was paling from the pain, but he squeezed out a smile anyways. “Ah... it’s you, Brother Zhou,” he managed. “I didn’t know that you would be gracing us with your presence. My mistake.”

He looked eerily at the two, then waved his hand. “An expert has arrived, so we won’t be inviting ridicule for ourselves. For us, the green hills never change, and the clear water runs forever — retreat!”

The few still-living Scorpions scrambled up and swiftly followed after him as he drew back. Zhou Zishu didn’t give chase, merely turning around to look at Wen Kexing.

The latter’s eyes flashed, but he smiled. “You should still be careful about...”

Before he could finish, Zhou Zishu’s pupils shrank. His body whirled around, and Baiyi turned into a pretty pattern of afterimages. It struck something with a ding, following which a muffled grunt came from the forest in back; he shook his head with a sigh. “Using the same trick twice on the same person... do these Scorpions do anything other than the same old stuff? From that alone, how are they on par with Four Seasons Manor at all?”

Wen Kexing stared at him for a minute, entranced, then began to smile, reaching a hand up high to grab the air.

Zhou Zishu frowned. “What are you doing?”

“There’s... light around you,” Wen Kexing whispered. “I’m catching it so I can see.”

Zhou Zishu raised a brow slightly. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he leaned against the trunk of a big tree. “Actually... Xue Fang isn’t even around, is he?”

Wen Kexing kept grinning. He looked at his own fingers obsessively, then loosened them a little, as if something might leak out of his completely empty palm. His voice was still extremely quiet, and his breaths were like fine silk, as if they could be cut off at any time. “You could tell.”

“What about the real key?”

“Lost, since I threw it off the top of the mountain,” Wen Kexing answered slowly, narrowing his eyes.

Zhou Zishu nodded, suddenly not knowing how to react. With no key, there was no point in having the Lapis Armor, and everyone that had fought to the death on Fengya, ultimately fighting themselves into corpses, had not known unto death that what they were fighting over was actually just a pile of junk.

“It took me three years to secretly foster Sun Ding,” Wen Kexing softly went on. “How else could such a braindead moron be a rival to the Hanged Ghost and Ghost of Impermanence?”

“After that, you lured the Hanged Ghost into stealing the key when their fight was getting white-hot.”

Wen Kexing laughed. “I didn’t have it, yet they all wanted it... thirty years ago, evil Ghosts of all sizes began to long for the arsenal. The Lapis Armor belonged to the five major clans while the Ghosts weren’t yet established, so they didn’t dare to act too rashly, only able to get things going with the key,” he explained in a whisper.

Then, he turned his head away and coughed twice, which brought some traces of blood out with them. He gently wiped them off of his face before continuing. “Back in the day, Madam Rong gave the key to my dad. They all thought that only three had been present, then. Madam Rong died, and Long Que safeguarded the secret to his grave... if things actually had been like that, the world would have been very peaceful, wouldn’t it?”

“There was a fourth?” Zhou Zishu creased his brow, following which he had a quick realization. “Was it Zhao Jing? He... didn’t have any real power back then, so since he was unable to talk about this with people from righteous sects, he secretly joined up with Ghost Valley?”

“Eh, probably... they’re all dead now, in any case.” Wen Kexing let out a cold laugh, remaining silent for a long time before he took a deep breath. “It’s ridiculous that Madam Rong and the rest never ended up telling my dad what exactly the key they gave him was, all for the sake of keeping their secret. He only saw it as

something important that could never be thrown out, which was why he took my mom to hide out in a small mountain village for a full ten years... alas, on the year that I was nine, something unfortunate happened in that village. An owl—“

“Enough,” Zhou Zishu interrupted. After a minute of quiet, he softened his tone. “That’s enough. It’s already been so many years, you don’t need to...”

“My parents believed that they were implicating the villagers,” the other went on regardless. “They wanted to fight until the bitter end, and simply sent me away the night of. I wasn’t worried and didn’t know my own weight, so I snuck back. I saw...”

He sighed, slowly raising his head to gaze at the vague, dim sky. “I saw... my dad’s body, cut into two pieces. My mom was collapsed to the side. Her hair was in disarray, her clothes weren’t their original color anymore, her face had been mutilated, her nose had been cut off, the outline of her features was unseeable, and a staff had pierced her through her chest and out her back, passing right under her shoulder blades. Do you know how I recognized her?”

Zhou Zishu watched him without a word.

“I liked pretty people when I was young, and thought that my mom was the most beautiful person in the world. I liked to cling to her and tell her to carry me, so I got used to seeing her shoulder blades. Even when I die, I won’t forget that.”

“That’s how the key landed in Ghost Valley’s hands, but... how did you...?”

“Me?” Wen Kexing raised his brows, then suddenly started to laugh. The more he laughed, the louder he got, until a whimper-like noise finally came out of his throat. It was unclear whether he was actually laughing, or sobbing. “Me? I stumbled several times on my journey there, and came to look like a filthy mud monkey long before that. The second those evil Ghosts noticed me, I believed that I was going to die, and stood there stupefied. One came over and grabbed me, but then I subconsciously bit him, making him yell and say, ‘It’s a little lunatic.’ The people surrounding me laughed. One woman said that she wanted to peel my skin off to turn it into a human-leather coat when she got back. I was horribly scared... so I thought up a solution.”

Zhou Zishu’s throat bobbed slightly, brow slightly creased, yet he still said nothing.

It had already gotten late in the day. There was utter silence all around. Wen Kexing coughed a few more times, then continued. “I... right under all their watching eyes, I walked over, laid on my stomach, and bit mouthful after mouthful off of my dad’s corpse. He wasn’t easy to chew through, and it took a long time to tear pieces off, then swallow his flesh down into my stomach... and I put a little thought into my head; was I not made of his blood to begin with? As they watched, they slowly quit laughing. Ultimately, the man I had bitten was in charge, and he said that I had been

born a Ghost, so I shouldn't remain in the human world. After that, he brought me back with him to Ghost Valley.”

Zhou Zishu leaned down, then placed a hand on the side of Wen Kexing's face. Perhaps due to blood loss, the man's eyes were slightly unfocused, and his skin was freezing; upon feeling warmth, he unconsciously tilted his head to nuzzle into his palm. “I've been here for a full twenty years,” he said, breathless. “For the first twelve, I desperately survived, desperately climbed upwards, desperately... for the next eight, I had finally climbed to the top, and prepared for my main event.”

“You secretly aided Sun Ding, forced the Hanged Ghost into dire straits, baited him into stealing the key, tailed him, killed him, and then disposed of both his corpse and the key,” Zhou Zishu picked up. “This created the veneer that he had fled, thus making Ghost Valley come out in full force to hunt him down. You watched Sun Ding and Lao Meng each harbor their own motives, watched them—“

“In this world,” Wen Kexing cut him off, “there is only one thing that can destroy evil spirits... and it's the human heart.”

He abruptly turned his head to the side and coughed like his lungs were splitting open, inner breath turbid, the sensation of suffocation accordingly inundating him. Suddenly, a hand was pressed against the center of his back, and a soft current of internal force spread throughout his meridians and channels instantaneously, faintly clearing up his consciousness.

Seeing him slowly pass this breath, Zhou Zishu instantly curbed his efforts. “You're out of strength, but your wound is more serious in comparison. It needs to be wrapped up to staunch the bleeding, else I'll be too afraid to help you set your internal force into motion.”

Then, he looked into Wen Kexing's eyes. “I'll ask you this; do you want to live?”

The other watched him in silence for a very, very long time. “Will you... leave me?”

Smiling lightly, Zhou Zishu shook his head.

Like his life depended on it, Wen Kexing clenched his jaw, grabbed his hand, and forcibly propped himself up. “Live... why wouldn't I want to live? Why couldn't I live?! All those shameless, vile people of the world get to live, so why... why can't I...? I have to...”

He could no longer easily get his breath back, body swaying as he panted nonstop. Zhou Zishu sighed, sealed up his main acupoints, then picked him up in his arms, going off the mountain.

He brought the blood-covered man to that small town. It took no less than two days for Wen Kexing to awaken, where he could barely manage take in some food and drink. After a few more days, Zhou Zishu hired a carriage to bring them to Luoyang, but, right before they set out, they happened to run into Gao Xiaolian and Zhang Chengling.

The latter was still in shock. As soon as he saw him, he immediately threw himself at him and cried painfully, sobbing and hiccuping. “Shifu... Brother Cao, he...”

Gao Xiaolian’s eyes were red, as well. Zhou Zishu sighed. “I know,” he gently said, and placed his palm on top of the other’s head to soothe him.

Immediately after that, Zhang Chengling bust out another sentence: “Shifu... I-I killed someone, too... I killed someone...”

Zhou Zishu’s hand froze. Wen Kexing, who was reclined inside the carriage, also shifted his gaze over, looking at the little devil in astonishment.

Gao Xiaolian clenched her fists. “I had my part in that, too. Don’t cry — that guy was a villain! He deserved to be killed! We got lost on Fengya Mountain, then came across a man dressed in gaudy clothes. After following him for a bit, we learned that he was actually the boss of the Poisonous Scorpions. For some reason, though, his arm had been cut off, and he looked to have been hit with poisoned needles...”

Zhou Zishu looked pleased, while Wen Kexing couldn’t resist letting out hushed laughter. “After that, the guy seemed like he couldn’t keep his Scorpions under control,” Zhang Chengling supplemented, “and they f-fought each other...”

“You two used the confusion to eliminate the Scorpion?” Wen Kexing quietly asked.

Zhang Chengling made a stalling noise, feeling that even if the other party had been a bad guy, his own act of using another’s crisis was also very despicable.

The man laughed out loud — this was what it was to have a guardian deity watching over you.

Afterwards, Gao Xiaolian dried her tears and said farewell to them, heading back for Gao Manor. After enduring all sorts of trials, the girl had grown up over the span of a night. Zhang Chengling went with Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing to Luoyang, and after joining up with Lord Seventh and the Great Shaman, the ashes of Rong Xuan and Madam Rong were brought up Changming.

Following a month of recuperation, the Great Shaman began to remove the nails from Zhou Zishu, re-connecting his meridians.

Heavy snow fell from the Heavens on Changming that day. Wen Kexing stood outside the room, seeming to be mentally calm even as he heard cries coming from inside. Lord Seventh pat him on the shoulder all of a sudden. “Don’t worry, okay? If it was anyone else, there would be only a thirty-percent certainty, but it’s Zishu. Nothing will go wrong.”

Wen Kexing turned his head to look at him.

Lord Seventh smiled. “Since he was able to bear with putting the nails in himself way back when, why would he be scared when they’re pulled out? He’s...”

His succeeding words disintegrated, but a small smile was on his face, as if he was reminiscing about something.

Lord Seventh appeared to have an odd charisma that made one stand by his side, then calm down in his wake. Even so, Wen Kexing’s calm lasted only a short moment, after which he turned away and left. This prettyboy really does look like a huli jing, he thought to himself. I need to be on guard.

This action completely mystified Lord Seventh himself.

After being in a total coma for three months, Zhou Zishu woke up at last. He felt like an entire set of heavy shackles had been unburdened from him, his entire body becoming lighter, sans his right hand — that was being gripped tightly by someone who was apparently exhausted, as he was leaning to the side for a doze.

Zhou Zishu was momentarily distracted, thinking of the events that had led to this point just as if they were from a lifetime ago.

In the end, however, he simply stared at their entwined hands for a while, smiling gently. Yesterday, he had died when he had gone to bed, then awoken as someone new the next. The years that had passed were for nothing other than awaiting someone like this, who could stay with him both morning and night, holding his hand.

Extras

1 - On Changming

Changming Mountain was coated in snow the year round. Upon looking all around, everything would be a vast white, like misty clouds beneath the feet. In the environs was a couple of tiny thatched huts and one small courtyard, resembling a place that an immortal would live apart from the world.

Lord Seventh was currently warming up wine.

A rich aroma faintly wafted out, then far away via the window, the spitting image of ‘unfiltered wine with green foam, and a little red clay stove.’¹⁹⁰ The man seemed to be able to live life in elegance and comfort, even if he had been reduced to living in a forest deep in the mountains.

With a book in his hands, the Great Shaman sat beside him, and would occasionally be puzzled, then raise his head to ask some questions. Lord Seventh’s lowered eyes were staring at the tiny stove; he didn’t even need to think about any of what was being asked, as the answers came naturally to him. Had he not been born into the Prince Estate, he would have been full of enough literature to exam his way to fame.

Whilst the Great Shaman idly chatted with him, he went to clasp his hand. “Are you cold?” he whispered.

Lord Seventh shook his head at that, drawing the stove closer. Gazing out the window, he suddenly smiled. “Take a look at this place. It could be described as having a thousand mountains with no flying birds, and ten thousand paths with no human tracks.¹⁹¹ It’s only been a few days, yet I can’t even tell what night it is.”

¹⁹⁰ From Bai Juyi’s Inviting Liu Shijiu.
<http://chinesepoemsinenglish.blogspot.com/2009/12/bai-juyi-at-home-to-mr-liu-shijiu.html>

¹⁹¹ From River Snow, by Liu Zongyuan. It’s readable on his wiki page.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liu_Zongyuan

The Great Shaman's heart jumped. "You like it here?"

Lord Seventh side-eyed him with a grin. "If I said that I did, would you be able to accompany me in living here?"

The other considered this for a while, looking serious. "Lu Ta is still young... but if you really do like it here, I'll go back and instruct him properly, then after a few years pass, I'll hand Nanjiang over to him so that I can come live with you. How does that sound?"

Taken aback for a second, Lord Seventh then pfft out a laugh and lightly smacked him on the forehead. "You really are a dull club that takes everything seriously," he mumbled. "Who'd want to live in this hellscape? The air's cold and the ground's frozen. Nanjiang's still fun, at least." Then lowering his head, he smiled. "It's ready to drink."

He brought out wine cups, carefully poured two of them, handed one to the Great Shaman, and took one for himself. Putting it under his nose, he inhaled deeply, then narrowed his eyes. "As it goes, one boon covers for a hundred uglinesses. Only those that still smell of alcohol after being boiled belong to the top grade. There is a saying; 'three cups, and I enter the great Dao, one dou, and I'm one with nature.'¹⁹² There are a hundred kinds of anxieties in the human world, and only this can solve them, as—"

His speech was suddenly interrupted by a bunch of crashing and crunching noises. He sighed, his refined mood of drinking as he recited poetry immediately getting swept away, and took a sullen sip. "Those two fleas never give it a rest all day long," he rebuked in a whisper. "I can tell that Zhou Zishu's just fine, so let's say our goodbyes in two days' time. My ears need to be at peace."

Zhang Chengling's exercise didn't normally make so much noise, so, generally speaking, this overabundant, building-demolishing ruckus had to be from his two shifus exchanging blows.

The Great Shaman had said that as long as Zhou Zishu was able to wake up, the most dangerous phase would have since passed. It was obvious how the man had endured a lot of toughening up; he had awoken feebly for a few days, but after no more than a third to half a month, he was already able to get up. A few more days after that, he became a little more energetic, running and jumping, starting without stopping.

It was mystery as to who was provoking who in the pair, but, in Lord Seventh's words, 'You can't clap with just one hand.' They squabbled from morning 'til

¹⁹² From *Drinking Alone Under the Moonlight*, by Li Bai. <http://bs.dayabook.com/poetry/more-translations-from-the-chinese-by-arthur-waley-1919-at-sacred-texts-com/drinkingalonebymoonlight>

evening, then sat down nicely for dinner, which could also result in a quarrel that began with arguing, then went to pinching each other with chopsticks. Lord Seventh had found it interesting to watch at the beginning, but later got annoyed, refusing to eat with those two mandrills lest he got caught in the crossfire.

Rather bewildered, Lord Seventh had to lament. “Zishu used to be a very collected person. Why is... sheesh. Getting close to cinnabar really does make you red, and getting close to ink really does make you black.”

The Great Shaman smiled a little. “This is good, actually. The process of reconstructing one’s meridians is acutely painful, and straightening them back out afterwards is also very difficult. It’s extremely cold here, too. It wouldn’t be easy for an ordinary person to return to free motion, but Manor Lord Zhou is not only active, he’s forcing his meridians to come apart. He will be a bit pained during this period, but it’ll be good for him in the future.”

Wen Kexing changed the direction of Zhou Zishu’s shoulder with a palm, as if wanting to encircle his entire body in his arms. The other used that momentum to flip over one of his arms, and before he landed, he used a foot to lift up Wen Kexing’s chin, forcing him to draw a step back. After that, he flicked his fingers out like a gale, sneak-attacking him. Wen Kexing inadvertently got hit, and his knees went soft, nearly putting him into a one-knee kneel — however, the second he was falling, he rolled to the side and grabbed Zhou Zishu’s calf, making them both tumble into a ball.

Apart from ice, there was snow, and Lord Seventh, the Great Shaman, and Zhang Chengling were all staying far away from them, so the ground was clear, and not that filthy. After rolling a few full turns, Wen Kexing pinned Zhou Zishu underneath him with a wily grin, his hands placed on either side of the other’s head. “Give up yet?”

Zhou Zishu was in preliminary recovery from his serious injury, so he wasn’t as strong as he had been before, panting slightly. “...That was a cheap trick.”

Wen Kexing cozied up to him, lowering his voice with a smile. “You were clearly the one to be underhanded first.”

“Hey, Ol’ Wen.”

Wen Kexing hummed as he licked his neck. “What?”

“I’m saying...”

Zhou Zishu said a few words with seeming carelessness, but Wen Kexing didn’t quite catch them, somewhat puzzled. “Hm?”

In that split second of thought, he got elbowed in the chest, letting out a grunt, and was instantly lifted off. The sky whirled around as both his arms got pinned behind his

back, following which he was pressed onto the ground. Zhou Zishu imitated the hoodlum look the other had just had, blowing into his ear with a chuckle. “How about this? Do you give up yet?”

It took Wen Kexing a good deal of effort to turn his head and see him. “Are you trying to tie me up, Ah-Xu?”

Zhou Zishu raised his brows. “That’s a good idea.”

He went and tapped on the other’s acupoints. Seeing that he was motionless for the time being, he relaxed slightly, sat to the side, then wiped off his face. “My little wife, your husband got a head full of sweat just from restraining you,” he said ruefully.

A hand suddenly reached out and pressed against his forehead; all he saw was the should-have-been-frozen Wen Kexing slowly getting up. “Oh? Let me see... you really are sweating? Don’t catch a cold.”

“You actually altered your acupoints!”

Under his shock, Zhou Zishu had already escaped over a zhang away from him, on-guard as he watched him. Wen Kexing threw him a flirty look. “I can do even more than that.”

Afterwards, the two pounced yet again, continuing their earth-shaking brawl.

As such, the Great Shaman had actually misinterpreted them a little. The reason why they fought all day was for that meridian stuff, but another cause stemmed from an issue that needed to be settled urgently — the outcome was not yet determined, the top and the bottom not for certain, and both of them had fires in their hearts that could only be vented as they quibbled.

At first, Zhang Chengling had been earnest in running over to spectate them, thinking about what he could learn. Later on, he had discovered that their fights were too bitter, and he could only learn moves such as ‘Black Tiger Digs Out the Heart’, ‘Monkey Steals the Peach’, and ‘Universe Goes Topsy-Turvy’, which really had no reference value. Lamenting the fact that both of these experts had returned to their primal states, he henceforth practiced his own martial arts, style by move.

The youth was confused, though; his shifu forever thought that his style was hard to look at, but wasn’t his own rolling about the ground with Senior Wen absolutely graceless?

Two masters had been thoroughly reduced to two ruffians, and, beyond their intentions, accidentally ended up impeding their student’s progress with their conduct.

Only after Zhou Zishu took his daily dose of medicine each evening would they call a truce. The Great Shaman bestowed medicine based on the person; for someone that was frail-bodied and wouldn't be able to take it, his prescription would be light and easy, but for Zhou Zishu, who would be fine no matter what torment came at him, he gave nothing but powerful medicine. After taking it, the latter would feel terrible all over for a short while, clenching his teeth as he withstood it, and then after the effect had passed, he would always be soaked in sweat.

Following a wash, then a rest, he would recuperate enough energy to continue hopping all over the place the very next day.

Once Zhou Zishu had taken this medicine for the final time, the Great Shaman and Lord Seventh said farewell and left the day after. Even though Nanjiang had always been honest in folk, and the Shamanet Lu Ta was overseeing it, they had been abroad for too long. Seeing them off, it was then the first day that Zhou Zishu didn't have to bear with drinking that medicine that was akin to death by a thousand cuts, causing that night to be bizarrely peaceful.

Wen Kexing carried a jug of wine into the room, then shook it in front of Zhou Zishu's face. The other took it with no formality in the least. He meandered over to stick himself to Zhou Zishu's side, eyes shining brightly as he stared at his profile.

Getting stared at so blatantly, Zhou Zishu drank down a mouthful of wine. "What are you looking at?"

Wen Kexing grinned. "Aren't you afraid that I've drugged that?"

"With what kind of drug?"

"What kind do you think?"

Zhou Zishu shot him a look, sneering in mockery. "You wouldn't dare to slip me an aphrodisiac. Aren't you afraid that my wild nature would break out and put a handle on you?"

Wen Kexing frowned, feigning upset. "Right. That really is a bit of a worry." Propping up his chin, he looked Zhou Zishu up and down, then sighed and shook his head. "You should just let me make the move. Otherwise, I'm thinking that if it keeps going down like this, we'll both be practicing monks."

The other glanced at him. "Why wouldn't it be you letting me make the move?"

Wen Kexing's perverted hand slowly reached out and touched the side of his waist, ambiguously rubbing up and down. "I'd let you try out all sorts of moves, but..."

His wrist got snatched by Zhou Zishu. They contained their strength so as not to tear the roof off the room, then began wrangling again.

Zhang Chengling passed them as he was returning from his practice, finding this surprising sight unsurprising, since he knew that they were duking it out again. He thought to himself, Why can't they just spend time together properly? Every single day, they bicker like children. Seeing how very off-beat they were, he thus sighed at the vicissitudes of his own life, then silently turned to go back to his own room.

Following three hundred rounds, neither of the two's strength could keep holding up, so they took a break. Wen Kexing snatched the wine pot, took a couple big swigs of it, then exhaled. After sprawling out on his back atop the bed, he waved his hand. "No more. I don't have the energy today."

Zhou Zishu sighed in relief, like he had been waiting for those words to come out of this Great One. He then sat on the edge of the bed and gave him a little push inwards. "Scoot over."

Wen Kexing shifted in, facing the bedcurtains above, as if suddenly distracted. "Ah-Xu, after this bout, you'll be fully recovered," he said, after a long time of staring blankly. "Will you go with me for a trip down the mountain?"

Zhou Zishu shut his eyes in rest, giving an mn at that. "I'm pretty much done with it right now, I can go. What are you going to do?"

Wen Kexing was silent. The other waited for a long while. Feeling this a bit strange, he opened his eyes and tilted his head — gazing straight at him, the man still looked like his mind was wandering somewhere beyond the sky. "What is it?"

Wen Kexing's eyelids trembled, and he managed out a smile. "It's nothing. Back then, my parent's corpses were aired out in the wilderness, and they didn't even get a monument. I've been unfilial. For over twenty years, I've never gone back to take a look. I should probably..."

Zhou Zishu sighed, then slowly reached his arms out to loop around his waist. Wen Kexing obediently turned on his side, putting one hand on the other's back. His fingers were placed on Zhou Zishu's shoulder blades, and he unconsciously traced over their outlines, burying his face into his shoulder. "Ah-Xiang, too..." he said, muffled.

"While you were recovering in town, I went back, found her and Xiao Cao... and put them to rest in the ground together."

"Thank you," Wen Kexing answered hazily, his next words nearly inaudible as his arms that gathered Zhou Zishu close seemed to tighten. "For half my life, I've been a solitary person. I had thought that I'd have Ah-Xiang... but she's gone. That time you

were in a coma, I wasn't as confident as the Great Shaman. I thought that... if you... I..."

Zhou Zishu suddenly realized that his shoulder was apparently wet. He couldn't resist bowing his head, but Wen Kexing waved his hand to extinguish the lights, choking up slightly. "Don't look at me."

Having never been one to comfort another, Zhou Zishu could only allow him to hold him tight.

Slowly, Wen Kexing's hands began to wander on him. He was slightly uneasy, but the man didn't have even a tiny bit of a joking overtone; all he did was constantly call his name, as if highly uncertain, bringing with it a slight terror and desperation. Zhou Zishu sighed on the inside, thinking, Screw it, he's so pitiful. I'll let him, just this once.

He used enormous self-restraint to relax. For the first time in his entire life, he was handing himself over to someone else without any defenses. Hair tangling, when their heads were rubbing together, the man only muttered to him with a bit of entreaty, "Ah-Xu, don't ever leave me..."

Even in this utterly frigid land, there were threads of warmth. They set themselves free from beneath the bedcurtains, then slowly spread outwards, as if they could let a flower bloom.

At daybreak the next morning, Zhou Zishu was in a rare, late sleep. Upon opening his eyes to see the one in his arms, Wen Kexing had a faint, perfectly content smile.

As soon as he moved, Zhou Zishu came to. He felt like every single thing on his body was off, and that he was being firmly embraced by a certain someone.

He opened his mouth in want to swear at him, but Wen Kexing had long been guarded against this action of his. In that split second the other had opened his eyes, he stifled his self-satisfied grin, then gazed deeply into his eyes with a complicated expression, looking like a million emotions were within him.

When Zhou Zishu, the nagger that hadn't yet spoken, caught sight of his red-rimmed eyes, he harshly swallowed everything back down, not knowing what he ought to say. He had no choice but to stiffly turn his back to him. "If you're getting up, do it by yourself. Don't bug me," he mumbled.

Wen Kexing immediately hugged him from behind, laid down again, and put his fake pitiable expression away when the other couldn't see. Elated, he thought of how a soft heart was way more enticing than a soft waist.

However, once his short moment of happiness was done, his worries started up again. Furtively opening his eyes to peek at the one beside him, he thought, But... every time I want to do this from now on... will I have to put on a crying act?

That seems... like a bit too much of a tragedy.

2 - A Beloved, A Confidante

People in jianghu were making a terrible fuss, but who had actually seen the Lapis Armor's key before?

Wen Kexing had.

He recalled that the 'key' that had initiated countless bloody tempests had actually been only a cun long, thin as a cicada's wing, and weighed practically nothing in the hand, like some kind of oddly-shaped, beaded flower that a young lady would wear in her hair.

What a terrible flower.

Atop Fengya Mountain, fierce wind blew at Wen Kexing's long robes. His palm was bruising. The Hanged Ghost had just died by his hand; his corpse had already fallen beneath the cliffs, gone, and from that point on, there would be even more people hiding bodies there.

Mortal humans cannot enter this land of evil spirits at will?

Very well! I, in a shell of mortality, will nudge this spirit world over for you to take a look.

He opened his hand and flung. The lightweight key had turned into bits of dust in his palm, falling into the infinite depths of the cliffs below.

"Ah-Xiang, let's go."

He situated himself into orientation of a watching bystander, then brought his little girl with him to hike through jianghu for over three months, waiting for various people to make their appearances. Within those months, he went from lands of luxuriant forests and growing bamboo, to passing through seas of yellow sand and desert, to drinking a sip of a sunny day's snow, then to the fair hands of this brothel beauty, filling his lungs with the cosmetic fragrance of pear flowers.

Afterwards, in Jiangnan, he came across a vagrant that was sunbathing as he leaned against the corner of a wall.

Vagrants were nothing strange. What was strange was that he noticed a faint light hung in the eyes and condensed on the lashes of the man, then felt like something had stuck into his heart, as if he had witnessed the rise of peace and crush of defeat therein. Love and hatred acquired over generations, gratitude and vengeance gained

since time immemorial — all that had been pressing heavily down upon his chest was lightened a tad, beyond his control.

“All my life of being down and out, I return to the inside of the goblet...” he suddenly recited.

“What?”

Ah-Xiang was a dumb girl that didn't understand dogcrap. She couldn't even comprehend the words of humans clearly, to say nothing of any sorrowful past happenings or plaintive anxieties of the present year. He had no choice but to gloss over it with a smile.

Against expectations, Ah-Xiang leaned full out the window, looked down, and then crisply called out on the next beat: “Young Master, look at that guy. If you say he's a beggar, he doesn't have any worn bowl next to him for that. If you say he's not, he's been sitting there stupidly all morning without doing anything other than grin like an idiot. Is he an idiot?”

In that moment, Wen Kexing was a teeny bit angered, as if a corner of his thoughts had been pried into, as if this stupid girl had thrown a rock into nice, mirror-like waters, causing ripples to go off in all directions.

He settled himself, however, and gave a collected reply. “He's sunbathing.”

He noticed that the beggar had listened in on them, actually raising his head to glance at him. They were on a balcony, the street was wide, and the sounds of humans were akin to a boiling pot. With that sort of hearing strength...

Wen Kexing stroked the tips of his chopsticks, his recent languidness vanquished. Those martial arts were not weak. Below the surface of Jiangnan, an undercurrent was fiercely swelling, and it was already a season of turmoil. Those that came and went from every major sect, hailed as famous, were not few — which road had this one come from?

That night, Wen Kexing brought Ah-Xiang with him to think up of every possible method for tailing the vagrant, but unexpectedly, he got to see a good show in a worn-out hall that was leaking air from all four of its sides.

In today's martial circle, people with that insight, that skill, and that presence could be counted on both hands — which one was he? In truth, Wen Kexing himself couldn't say for certain whether he had followed him out of caution, or simply pure curiosity.

Some people, who flaunted themselves as being lonely at the top for long, upon abruptly meeting someone who caught their eye, would typically be unable to resist chasing them down to thoroughly scrutinize them.

Yet, he had never thought that this chase would inextricably entangle him for more than half his lifespan.

From that rundown hall in the middle of nowhere, a kid that only knew how to cry was escorted all the way to Lake Tai. Zhao Jing, the Qiushan swordsman of the lake, was his number one, lifetime enemy.

Emotions running all over the place inside this illustration, he opposed the one who had been bought off for two silver coins all day long. At times, Wen Kexing would ponder: had he not stirred up this reservoir of disastrous water, would Zhang Chengling have been able to remain in obscurity, relying on his father's protection to live his life?

Even though jianghu folk would inevitably sigh at the mention of this tiger of a father having a dog of a son, that tiger father would at least still be around. With both parents, his family would have been thriving financially. What would it matter, if he lived through life behind closed doors?

Wen Kexing's chest held demons, shame, and a heart that was infinitely frozen. Hence, he was obliged to not betray any of his complex emotions, pestering the vagabond Ah-Xu regardless of consequences.

As for the man's origin, Wen Kexing already had a guess, but he still couldn't understand him in any way. Why did someone whose authority had reached such a high extent lower himself to advancing and retreating as suitable? The endless carnage he had experienced was like one big dream, where he floated through life like so; how could he still harbor the cultivated heart of a child?

At the time they were both together in the Yellow Springs, Wen Kexing couldn't resist feeling out for a Lapis Armor piece on the imp's body, but ended up bumping against a flexible nail.

For writers, the precious was treasured. For warriors, might — what ties did he have with that foreign, discordant object?

He knew that this sickly devil, completely sallow in complexion and nothing much to look at, had instantly and firmly been branded onto the soft flesh of his heart.

Following that, even the Poisonous Scorpions got mixed in with this. Heroes and cowards of all walks of life had come to put on their own performances, occupying the small stage to its brim. Ah-Xu and he escorted Zhang Chengling back to those upright factions that had mouths full of 'traditional virtues', and partway through, he

watched the man give that dumb kid pointers on martial arts; for a moment, he couldn't resist wanting to show off his skill, also striking out a move or two.

He didn't expect that Ah-Xu, from one sword move that had been morphed beyond recognition, would be able to readily expose the history of the 'Qiuming Sword'.

The Heavens and the Earth were manifest, and jianghu was so vast; who would remember its wanderers that were as fleeting as shooting stars?

Only he could.

For such a short period of time, the world was their hut. Wen Kexing found a tiny space that was three-chi-wide, where he could peacefully sit down with another like so, and reminisce together about an old married couple, who, as far as the majority of folks in this world were concerned, had no significance.

He listened to the man's mild voice, amidst the wind and insects' chirps. "If someone has only themselves their whole life, on-guard against everyone aside from themselves at all times and all places, never being close to anyone, never feeling anything for anyone, only loving themselves... wouldn't that be miserable? Being a bad guy... is too painful."

Wen Kexing had a sort of impulse at that time, wanting to pour out all of the suffering he'd had in his life, dump out the grievances that filled his chest for his unstated confidante to see. However, he never had a way to do so, only able to divulge a couple phrases by means of a disharmonious, roving, Qin Hui-like tale.

Too painful! he thought. Being a bad guy is too painful.

Why couldn't you and I have met each other ten years earlier, Ah-Xu? Why is it that when I did meet you, I was already something both human and ghost, yet not either, and you were already near death from injury? Why, in this world, do homes and happiness always get destroyed, and friends and confidantes always meet up late?

Heroes will get to the ends of their roads, beauties will lose their charms as they age... if someone wants to live according to their own hearts, how difficult should that be?

It might have started from there, where an inner demon-like obsession suddenly birthed in his heart. He thought, Why can I not follow my own desires this one time? Why can I not keep him with me?

Inside Puppet Manor, when availing himself of the man's heavy injury, he was momentarily lost in madness, wanting to press a hand into his qihai acupoint,

thinking, I just need a bit. Even if it hurts some, I just need a bit. Then I can keep Ah-Xu in the palm of my hand for a long, long time.

That path of accumulated callousness was nevertheless defeated by the strike of that slightly distressed phrase: “Other people don’t understand, but do you not understand, either?”

How can I not understand?

Of all the living things he had seen in his life, Ah-Xu alone weighed heavily on the innermost part of his heart. He conceded to the damned drifter, conceding until that gouged out his heart and eroded his bones, until he couldn’t bear to disobey him the slightest bit.

This was exactly what it felt like to be human.

This was...

The world’s villains, unparalleled in contemptibility, were like carps crossing the river. There were also uncommon folks similar in greatness to Long Que. That year at Puppet Manor had almost been the most calm and happy one he’d had in his thirty years of life.

He, Ah-Xu, and the brat Zhang Chengling would kill fowl, stew meat, boil mutton, and slaughter cows, divvying up a bowl of raw, rural wine.

He took Ah-Xu’s hand, which would easily get cold after his injury, into his arms to warm it, then felt like his own heart was melting, too. He believed himself to be a little intoxicated, somehow.

Ah-Xu’s mouth was unkind, but his heart was unbearably soft.

Ah-Xu was a grown man, yet he was still too afraid to eat walnuts.

Ah-Xu was a quaffer that drank both good and inferior wine down.

Ah-Xu was...

A confidante he had the luck to come across in his life, a close friend... a beloved.

Yet, he ended up having to awaken from this dream. There were still many disturbances happening in jianghu. The grisly storm he had set into motion himself had never once stopped for a break, and Green Bamboo Ridge was in dangerous turmoil. Many parties had since arrived, while a counterweight had yet to return to its position.

As he was the smooth-talking outsider, Old Wen, he was also the Ghost Master, whose red clothes had been dyed with blood. Those two people, who should have been completely irrelevant to each other, had been forcefully pinned into the same body due to deep enmity. How bizarre was that?

He finally got to cut down his foes, one by one, in this last battle, but he also lost his little girl in purple.

Ah-Xiang...

Ah-Xiang, gege's taking revenge for you. If you have a next life, you have to be reborn into a good family, with parents to protect and support you, and siblings to love and cherish you. When the time comes for your ten li of dowry, you can pick your affinity with your fool of a boy, Cao Weining, back up, where you'll be a perfect match. Don't have anything to do with the plagues of the righteous and the demonic ever again.

When he faced the Scorpions by his lonesome, he was covered in blood and sweat. Looking towards the empty sky, he reminisced on the recompense of his own immense hatred, an indescribable exhaustion within him.

He thought, My grudge is appeased. Death would be becoming. I may as well just... give up, right?

But somebody wasn't going to let death end his troubles.

When Ah-Xu came with Baiyi's swordlight, like an elegant nobleman of scholarship, the emotions in Wen Kexing's heart could not be clearly explained to outsiders.

What decades-long grudge? What silent suffering? What Lapis Armor? All of that was quickly cast to the back of his mind. Aside from the vagrant in front of him, he could no longer see anything else.

Captivated in such an instant, he thought, As long as he's willing to give me the tiniest bit of affection, from this point on, every day he lives, I will live with him. If he passes on, I will hold a bundle of dry grass, douse myself in kerosene, and burn up together with him, turning to ash, becoming one with the earth in the same spot.

As long as you're willing, as long as you want me...

Can I make an extravagant request for a minute, to be with you until we grow the white hairs of age?

3 - Last Life, This Life

Some who had died would look back on their own lives and feel no worries. Their three hun and seven po souls¹⁹³ would then vanish by over half, and they would follow Soulhook Envoys in a fog down Yellow Spring Road, forgetting as they walked it, not knowing what night it even was by the time they arrived at the Bridge of Helplessness. After that, they would pick up that bowl of forgetting brew, and their previous lives would be completely gone.

Those who had done good would have their virtuous merits discussed. Those who had done evil would go to the underworld. If they deserved rebirth or transmigration, they would re-enter the reincarnation cycle. After death, everything was settled, and the consciousness would be as clean as white snow, starting over anew.

Therefore, whenever someone shut their eyes, the people that still lived would always do all they could to satisfy whatever desires they left unfinished, to save them the extra hardship as they traveled Yellow Spring Road.

Some would still have unresolved obsessions from prior to death, and their souls would follow them in their walk, unwilling, all for the sake of material gains from the mortal plane. They would then be made to bathe in the Yellow Springs, and after getting over themselves, a ferryman would pull up to see them off to rebirth.

The living's events were not for the dead to worry about.

Yellow Spring Road was very long — the length it would take one to forget was exactly how long it would be.

The only thing that couldn't be forgotten was love. After walking four-thousand, four-hundred and forty-four zhang, they could still look back and line up in a row beneath the Bridge of Helplessness. Those waiting for someone else would sometimes wait a day or two, sometimes a decade or two, or sometimes an entire mortal lifespan.

Some would wait for another to come, but that someone would be so out of it, they couldn't remember them any longer. Occasionally, there would be some that could, but they would be one aged person with one young one, and even though they shouldn't recognize each other, they would end up clasping each other's hands with tears in their eyes, all while a Ghost Messenger would prompt them from nearby: "You two, the time has come. Get going..."

In love of the mortal world, there was always a fondness for saying some oaths of eternal love, but those were only terms that would last no more than a few decades, no

¹⁹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po

more than one life-and-death cycle of rebirth, and then it would be, ‘You are you, and I am me.’ How was that not laughable?

These words were what Cao Weining was hearing the Ghost Messenger say to Meng Po as he crouched beside the Bridge of Helplessness.

The Messenger had stated that his name in life had been the surname Hu, given Jia, and he was a passionate person. Cao Weining listened to him bother Meng Po with his non-stop chatter while she ignored him, ladling soup at her own pace. The Bridge never stopped metamorphosing; legend stated that how much forgetting brew was drunk down corresponded to how wide the Bridge would be. One cup forgot an age, dust returning to dust, earth to earth.

Messenger Hu Jia babbled for half the day but never saw Meng Po raise her head, so he got in close to converse with Cao Weining. “Kid, why aren’t you drinking the soup? Waiting for someone?”

Mortals were insipid in love and luck, and all of them were middling. It was rare to have one that was so clear-headed, where even an immortal ghost of the netherworld would be willing to talk more to him.

“Ah...” This was the first time Cao Weining was speaking with the Messenger, and he was more or less startled from the favor. “Haha, yes. You are—“

Hu Jia had absolutely no intention of having an exchange with him; he was probably just getting bored from having nothing to do, and wanted to find someone to dump words onto. “There was another that waited here before,” he straight-up cut him off, “and once he started, he was waiting for three hundred years.”

Cao Weining was taken aback. “Th-three hundred years... who has lived for so many years?” he trembled out. “The one he was waiting for... didn’t have the surname Ye, right?”

“Oi, why do you care about what his surname is? A surname’s just what you’re called. If someone’s surname is Huang or Di for ‘Emperor’ in one life, after jumping into that spring of rebirth, their next life might have the surname Zhu or Gou for ‘pig’ and ‘dog’. Who even knows.” Hu Jia waved his hand, then pointed at the Three-Life Rock. “He sat there, waiting for three hundred years. Then he went back to the place he started, where he first got to meet his someone. But, well, you know how that went?”

“How?” the other asked, egging him on.

“He chose another, better match.” Hu Jia sighed.

Right then, Meng Po finally lifted her head to glance at him. “Messenger Hu, mind your words,” she said expressionlessly.

Hu Jia gave a yeah. “Fine. This guy was somewhere in the ranks of Emperors, Princes, Generals, and Ministers. I have to obey the law of karma, and can’t talk about it... who are you waiting for, young fellow?”

“I’m waiting for my wife.”

Hu Jia didn’t feel that to be strange at all. “How old was she when you died?”

“Seventeen,” Cao Weining answered honestly.

“Seventeen... back when I died, I too had a seventeen-year-old wife at home. What a shame...” Hu Jia shook his head. That time was too long ago, and he could no longer clearly remember how that wife had looked. “I advise you not to wait. She’ll keep growing up through her life, and by the time she comes down, she’ll be an old lady in her seventies. She’ll have long forgotten a man from her teens. I’ve seen a lot of people before that come waiting and leave waiting, only for a scene of expectation and then heartbreak. You should quit dwelling on things as soon as possible and pour yourself a vat of Meng Po’s soup. You’ll clean forget any sort of wives or concubines you had.”

Meng Po raised her head again, still expressionless. “Messenger Hu, mind your words.”

Hu Jia shut up, dejected, but saw Cao Weining start to smile. “That’d be just fine, and I look forward to it. It would be best if she can’t remember a bit of what I look like anymore. Once she passes before me — bright-eyed, worry-free, and happy — and I see her move on, I’ll have no worries, myself.”

“You don’t feel unhappy?” Hu Jia wondered.

Cao Weining looked at him strangely. “What would I be unhappy about?” he countered. “That’s my wife, not my enemy. How would seeing her be okay make me unhappy?”

The other was mute for a short moment, smiling. “You’re taking this well.”

“Am I?” Cao Weining said with quite some embarrassment, scratching his head. “I’ve had no other advantages in my life than being able to take nothing to heart... well, there is just one thing. I was beaten to death by my own shifu. I’m afraid that she’s taken it hard, and is never going to let him go.”

“What sort of scandalous thing did you do, for him to beat you to death?”

“Cough... it’s probably because of that little thing about the righteous and the demonic being unable to coexist. He said that my wife was a villain of Ghost Valley, and I insisted on being by her. In a fit of anger that his dignity was put on the spot, he killed me.”

His tone was relaxed to the point that it was like he was talking about someone else, and it was hard to tell just from listening that he was reminiscing about his own manner of death. Hu Jia became intrigued, then crouched next to him. “You don’t hold any hatred?”

Cao Weining pointed at a Soulhook Envoy that was floating over with a ghost. “On the road, I heard that gentlemen recite ‘dust returns to dust, earth returns to earth.’ I then felt that no matter how big my grievances are, there’s nothing to hate. I’m already at rest in the ground, so what power would hatred have? Wouldn’t I just be making things difficult for myself?”

Hu Jia looked up to see Hei Wuchang floating past with his black, blank face, and whispered out a complaint. “Hey, don’t listen to them. Our underworldly Soulhook Envoys only ever say one sentence, and they’ve said it for who knows how many years, never once changing it...”

Meng Po’s gaze was a fixed glare once more. “Messenger Hu, mind your words,” she said blankly for the third time.”

Hu Jia sighed, pointing at her as he spoke quietly to Cao Weining. “See? That also goes for our Meng Po. I’ve gone back and forth the Bridge of Helplessness for centuries, and each time I do, she says that phrase, ‘Messenger Hu, mind your words.’ This netherworld is a real lonesome place.”

Cao Weining smiled. As he listened to the lonely Mister Messenger babble in his ear, he gazed out at the traveled road, thinking, If Ah-Xiang became an old woman, what would she look like? She’d definitely be one with plenty of energy, lively and bold. She...

All of a sudden, he stood up, eyes in wide-open circles. He saw that in an area not far away, a familiar girl was currently following a Soulhook Envoy over with a skip in her step. While she walked, she ceaselessly surrounded the Envoy with questions, who was concentrating with their head down as they walked, completely ignoring her. Getting pressed so urgently, they could only say, “Dust returns to dust, earth returns to earth.”

Cao Weining opened his mouth to call out: “Ah-Xiang...”

Gu Xiang stopped in her tracks, then inclined her head to look over. For a moment, she was stunned. At first, it seemed like she wanted to cry, but she ended up stifling it

all, transforming it into a face that was smiling wide. She dove at him like a little bird. “Brother Cao! I knew you would be waiting for me!”

As if he hadn’t seen her for a lifetime already, he held her tight, but then got to thinking again: With how she looks, she didn’t become an old lady... doesn’t that mean she died early? After that, he became worried and upset, hundreds of feelings criss-crossing inside him. His tears started to come down, falling into the water of the Yellow Springs, making circle after circle of ripples, startling even the ferrymen.

Hu Jia shut his mouth, watching the mutually-embracing couple with a distant smile.

Only this meeting at the head of the Bridge appeared to stretch on forever, until the Heavens were withered and the Earth was aged.

Another Ghost Messenger on the Bridge called out: “You two, the time has come. Get going...”

Like a pendulum utterly devoted to its duty, that same sentence alone had come out of their mouth year after year.

Gu Xiang lifted her head out of Cao Weining’s embrace, glaring viciously at the Messenger. “What are you so impatient for? You fuckin’ soul-calling over there?!”¹⁹⁴

The one on the Bridge froze, thinking to themselves, Isn’t that exactly what I’m doing?

Hu Jia just started laughing. “What a bold little lady,” he commented. “That’s a dauntless wife you have, young fellow.”

Cao Weining sounded happy and polite, despite his tears. “Forgive my shamelessness.”

Standing up, Hu Jia pointed at the Bridge. “Alright, be on your way. Don’t miss the time of your rebirth. If you’re even a tiny moment off, it’ll be hard to say whether your vast riches will turn into you being roadside beggars. If your karmic links aren’t used up, you can continue as you are in the next life.”

With that, he led them up the Bridge. Standing before Meng Po and her soup, Gu Xiang hesitated. “If we drink this, we’ll forget everything. Can we just not, grandma?”

Meng Po looked at her with a pretty, blank face, silently shaking her head.

¹⁹⁴ A bit lost in context: traditionally, when a person got gravely ill, it was sometimes believed that their soul was leaving them, so people would loudly call their name to get their soul to come back. Hence, ‘soul-calling’.

“Little miss, if you don’t drink the soup, you’ll be a cow or a horse in your next life,” Hu Jia said. “Drink up.”

Gu Xiang’s eyes quickly went red again. Lowering her head, she was unwilling to move regardless of any persuasion. Hu Jia couldn’t take this, going to speak to Meng Po. “Look at that. It’d be fine to make things a little smoother, yeah? This isn’t easy. In this place, thousands and thousands of years pass, yet it’s not likely that we’ll ever see a pair of lovers that can find love no matter what. It really is—“

“Messenger Hu...”

“Yes, yes, I’ll mind my words,” he hurriedly picked up.

She hesitated for a moment, then suddenly took out two lengths of red string from her sleeves, spread them out in her hand, and presented them to Gu Xiang. The latter was caught off guard. “Take them quick, young miss,” Hu Jia hurriedly piped up from the side. “Elder Meng Po is showing you mercy. This is a fateful opportunity that even several lifetimes wouldn’t be able to cultivate. Take them and tie them on your wrists, it’ll save you from wondering if you’ll even meet up in your next life.”

Gu Xiang quickly took the red strings, then clumsily tied them to Cao Weining’s and her own wrists. Following that, they held hands, drank down the forgetting brew together, then re-entered the cycle of reincarnation.

Behind them, the faraway voice of that Soulhook Envoy was heard. “Dust returns to dust, earth returns to earth...”

There was also Hu Jia’s musing. “Ask the world what exactly love is...¹⁹⁵ even Meng Po’s broadened her horizons.”

“Messenger Hu, mind your words.”

Fifteen years later, in Luoyang city, the Young Lady of Landlord Li’s home conducted her coming-of-age ceremony. Landlord Li’s long-sworn brother, Hero Song, visited with his only son; one reason was to give birthday congratulations, and the other was to propose a marriage.

Back when this pair of children were in swaddling clothes, they had been brought up together, and upon playing with them, the adults had discovered that of the two little tykes, one had a red mark on their left hand, and one had a red mark on their right hand. How could that not be a karmic tie, produced in the womb? A betrothal had consequently been drawn up.

¹⁹⁵ From Yuan Haowen’s poem, Catching Fish.
<http://www.kekenet.com/kouyi/201412/345659.shtml>

It was now the season of green plums. A lad rode on a bamboo horse...¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Based on verses from Li Bai's Changan Ballad.
<https://28utscprojects.wordpress.com/2011/01/20/043/>

4 - Baiyi, Jianghu

Rumor had it that when celestials reached the end of their calculated lifespans, they would undergo Five Decays.¹⁹⁷ Once accustomed to staying within the boundaries of bliss, they would be reluctant to part with it, taking in the poison of aversion.¹⁹⁸ According to the ‘six harmonies mental cultivation’, once a ‘celestial’ ate and drank of the human world’s smoke and fire, they would present a waning appearance, their hairs turning white, qi gradually weakening, and body gradually declining. No longer would they prosper, nearing their own coffin.

Ye Baiyi was feeling as much right about now. His hair was getting whiter by the day, as if someone had a brush and was painting it somewhere unseen, bit by bit. When casually gathered up, it would come out in large chunks, too. Sometimes, he would suffer delirium, and forget where he had just been and where he was going. His energy was lacking; sometimes, he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep at night, and sometimes he would sleep, then find it hard to open his eyes when the sun was already high in the sky the next day.

Even so, he felt delighted, free, and without a smidgen of ‘aversion’. What the six harmonies had claimed was absolute nonsense.

The root cause of this was probably the fact that he had never taken himself as a celestial, but felt himself to be the living dead.

In his view, once he was off Changming, he was the living dead that had now opened his eyes to come alive, even if it was only for a few brief years, even if he would once again walk the path of mortality where one was born, grew old, got sick, and died.

He ate a lot of food on the daily. At times, he would traverse very long distances just to try out a purportedly-delectable snack from some area. The ancients told that wanting food and sex was human nature; he was too old to be in the mood for sex, so he threw his entire being into food. He was not a picky eater, eating everything and enjoying everything, where even a bowl of tofu, randomly grabbed by the proprietress of a roadside pub, could be finely savored by him for a good long while.

To someone who had eaten cold food and snow water for a century, the sourness, sweetness, bitterness, and spiciness of the world were all precious things.

He had paid visits to people that knew of what had happened thirty years ago. After going down every possible route, he had finally found the unremarkable graves of Rong Xuan and Yue Feng’r, took back the dust-covered Ancient Blade of the

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/F/87>

¹⁹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_poisons

Dragon's Back, then put their bones together, cremated them, placed them in a jar, and entrusted another with delivering them to Changming.

He had been wanting to obstruct those that were fighting over opening up the arsenal, but after seeing a farce first-hand, he felt fatigued again... what did their lives and deaths have to do with him?

Thinking himself to be just an old man on the brink of death, he had nothing to be concerned about while he lived, and nothing to do the day long. Thus, he assumed his duty to be traveling all North and South of the great river and eating all the food of the realm. Perhaps he would go until the day he could no longer move, and where he ended up would simply be the place he would die.

By the by, he missed Rong Changqing every once in a while.

Rong Changqing, his sole friend of this world, had already been dead for thirty years.

In spite of that, Ye Baiyi could still recall, without a single detail lost, how the other used to look, how he looked when young and proud, how he looked when teenaged and whimsical, and even how he looked when a babbling toddler.

Proud and wild during his life, Ye Baiyi refused to remember people of insignificance. The lone vivid recollection he'd had since his birth pertained to that man.

Rong Changqing had grown up with him since they were young. Unlike Ye Baiyi, who went looking for fights the moment he was born, he had been a very charming man whose calls to others had been akin to cleanses in a cool breeze. He had liked fine wine, famed swords, pretty people, and even literature. Anyone in the world could have been his friend, given that they gave him a cup of alcohol, but unfortunately, he'd had only one genuine friend — Ye Baiyi, who, when not practicing, would only taunt others.

'Ghost Hand' Rong Changqing's fame-starting work had been the Great Famine sword. At the time, he had been merely a young nobody. Without a single care, he had casually handed the blade that others would later call 'the General amongst swords' off to an old, wandering beggar, who had given him a pot of monkey wine and a book of secret techniques.

The wine, he had brought back to share with Ye Baiyi, while the book had contained the surviving sections of what following generations would call the six harmonies.

Later on, Ye Baiyi would hear that by great coincidence, Great Famine, which had wandered across jianghu, had fallen into the hands of the Zhang orphan. He suddenly

thought this a little absurd, as if their people and these events were vaguely connected into one circle. Death begot death, age begot age; this became a segment of misery not explained to completion, with no one left behind to do so fully.

Rong Changqing had been a young one; of those who practiced martial arts, which one could ever resist the magic of being one with the Heavens? His aptitude hadn't been enough, though. At times, when Ye Baiyi thought back on it, he felt that the thing was actually a demonic book with all sorts of snares inside it, luring humans into walking step by step down it until they were damned without reprieve. Maybe only one person out of millions would be chosen by it, then become its new successor, making them the spitting image of something that was neither human nor ghost.

Rong Changqing, a heavensent genius, had relied on his own strength to futilely complete the six harmonies, resulting in qi deviation.

Back then, Ye Baiyi had been out touring, in the midst of looking at Changming Mountain, thinking that it was unfrequented and very suited for his occasional solitary seclusion. The villagers below the mountain had just spread worsening hearsay about an 'Ancient Monk'.

Madam Rong had still been a not-yet-married girl, yet she had discarded her status to carry Rong Changqing up the mountain on her back, pleading with Ye Baiyi to save him.

The two had exhausted their minds for methods, with absolutely no results. In the end, out of a lack of option, Ye Baiyi had resolved to swap their fates by transferring Rong Changqing's power to himself. Surprisingly, when it came to him, he had actually come to fully grasp the wondrous six harmonies method by some karmic fluke.

So many people had successively asked for such a thing, yet hadn't received it. This heavenly 'pie', stinking of dogshit, had instead landed upon the head of someone who embraced the will to die.

Rong Changqing had been a sentimental one. He had decided to repay his two benefactors by marrying Madam Rong, and keeping Ye Baiyi company all his life on Changming.

He had been a fool. He'd had no idea that Madam Rong didn't want to keep another ice-cold man in such an ice-cold ghostland company her whole life, nor did he have any idea that Ye Baiyi... didn't want him to marry her.

He had been a fool. Exchanging a famed sword for a demonic book had been one foolish thing, and being engrossed in that book had been a second foolish thing, but in truth, those two previous things put together were not as foolish as his third foolish thing.

Had there ever been anything more ridiculous than that in the world?

Yes. Something even more ridiculous had been Rong Changqing's son, Rong Xuan. He had been a child as foolish as his old man, and a martial moron just as determined as his shifu, Ye Baiyi. He had been a combination of everybody's shortcomings, thus making his life destined for tragedy.

He hadn't understood that the thing martial artists searched for all their lives had been in the hands of his shifu and papa. Why had the both of them been so secretive? He had heard them say it was an extremely dangerous object, but young people did not view danger the same as their elders.

In anyone's youthful era, they would inevitably believe themselves to be different from others. What someone else couldn't do, they could, and what killed someone else wouldn't kill them.

Rong Xuan had run away bearing Dragon's Back, which Ye Baiyi had passed on to him himself. Rong Changqing and Madam Rong then had a big row. The girl that had formerly been talented, gorgeous, aspirant, steadfast, and faithful had turned into an aged and despairing woman from decades inside the frosted loneliness. She had differed from them; she had been a flower that needed excitement, needed sunlight and human presence.

Carnage of thirty years. The first step had been to run away, like it was predestiny... perhaps it had started from Rong Xuan, perhaps from Rong Changqing. Perhaps it had started even earlier, from that wandering old beggar and that 'General Great Famine', so quietly created.

Perhaps it had simply been a circle, duplicated over and over again in people's minds, continued down generations.

Thirty years later, Wen Kexing had come to grab onto a tiny hint, set to task, and then turn everything onto its head.

But, that was all in the past... in the afternoon of some random day, Ye Baiyi, who had just finished the last mouthful of his broth in a tiny tavern, suddenly had an apathetic thought; those alive, and those dead, were all in the past.

Those situated inside the playing field each had their respective griefs, like him, like Madam Rong, like Wen Kexing, like Zhou Zishu, like Zhao Jing, and even like Gu Xiang and Cao Weining. They all had attempted to 'jump out'.

Ye Baiyi had wanted to jump out of that curse of being one with the Heavens. Madam Rong had wanted to jump out of the iceland that was Changming. Wen Kexing had wanted to jump out of being an evil spirit and return to the human world.

Zhou Zishu had wanted to jump out of Tian Chuang and be free. Zhao Jing had wanted to jump out of the rules of all of jianghu, look down upon everyone from up on high, and grasp the universe in his hand. Gu Xiang and Cao Weining had wanted to jump out of the world's deep-seated prejudices to be together, standing alone as they cast everything away.

They conflicted, contested, schemed to exhaustion, and risked their lives.

Just like an abyss, some jumped over and got out, while some didn't make it, falling to their deaths.

And, that abyss had a name. It was... jianghu.