

## Chapter 25: Baiyi<sup>1</sup>

Wen Kexing was clearly more interested in him than in the strung-up ghost. Upon realizing that he left, Wen Kexing immediately made to follow. But the one who had clearly just stood in front of him seemed to vanish into thin air. Wen Kexing halted, searching the teeming crowd with his gaze.

Zhou Zishu was like a drop of water fallen into the ocean. Not a trace to be found. Wen Kexing narrowed his eyes in confusion, carefully scanning the place he vanished, unwilling to believe—but he really had disappeared before Wen Kexing's eyes.

In that moment, some emotion stirred in Wen Kexing's chest that he would not have cared to describe. As though something had slipped out of his grasp. There was a wisp of rage, as well, from who knows where.

It turns out this man could have disappeared any time. Even if Wen Kexing guessed his identity, guessed his intentions, he could still vanish in an instant—if he wanted. He had escaped the Window of Heaven's impassable net; he was the most slippery fish in the world.

Zhou Zishu had shaken off Wen Kexing to go to a bank, of all places.

The most prestigious bank in Dongting, or even all of Jiangnan, had an unpretentious name: "Ping'an Bank"<sup>2</sup>. The bank had no shortage of customers, but it was not ostentatious, and never tried to poach anyone's business. It seemed that the owner did not have such high ambitions, content as he was with this patch of grassland where the golden orioles flew overhead<sup>3</sup>.

Zhou Zishu looked up at the bank's signboard, pushed the door open, and immediately someone called out: "Sir, come in—are you here to make a withdrawal or..."

Zhou Zishu walked past the greeter and went straight to the proprietor. With a small smile, he said quietly: "I would like to ask your Master Song's assistance in some matters. I'll trouble you to contact a manager for me."

The proprietor stared, looking up at Zhou Zishu for a long while before venturing cautiously: "May I ask your name?"

Zhou Zishu spoke even quieter. "I'm an old friend of your Lord Seventh. Surnamed Zhou."

As soon as he spoke the words "Lord Seventh", the proprietor's expression changed at once. He stepped out behind the counter, stumbling over himself to give every courtesy, invited Zhou Zishu to sit, and called a subordinate to bring tea. He stood to one side

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks as always to yuer for reading with me, and thanks to the big brained THC groupchat for ongoing support and spot checks!

<sup>2</sup> 平安 means "peace", but is also the name of Jing Beiyuan's steward from Qi Ye.

<sup>3</sup> 草长莺飞: a commonly-used phrase from Qiu Chi's《与陈伯之书》 to describe Jiangnan.

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himself. With great respect, he said, "Please make yourself comfortable. I will send word to Master Song at once, but I'm afraid he is not in Dongting at the moment, so...would it be possible to wait a few days?"

Zhou Zishu nodded. "Take your time. Please, sit as well."

He politely gestured to the proprietor, who flapped his hands in refusal—his humble trepidation did not allow him to sit. He then asked, "Lord Zhou, will you speak of this matter to Master Song personally, or would you let this subordinate take care of it?"

Zhou Zishu thought for a moment before speaking. "I really have no urgent business, but I don't know whether you've heard of something called the 'Glazed Spiral'?"

The bank proprietor was startled. "This...indeed sounds familiar. Might Lord Zhou be asking about the five glazed shards that piece together to form the Glazed Spiral?"

Zhou Zishu nodded. "Indeed."

The bank proprietor thought it over, spread out a sheet of paper, wrote down the words "Glazed Spiral", and spoke again. "I know something, but I'm afraid nothing in great detail. If Lord Zhou does not mind waiting a few days, I do have a few channels to investigate for you."

Zhou Zishu looked at him, this proprietor who might have been thirty or forty. He had a shrewd face, spoke precisely, yet not too quickly; he weighed his words before voicing them. Certainly he had come out of that clever one's fox den. Zhou Zishu hadn't known that his old friend wielded so much power here, even so many years after leaving the capital. Perhaps this was more than a simple bank after all.

He drank a cup of tea and left. Who would have thought that the sometime Window of Heaven commander would rely on others to collect information, even going so far as to ask that man for help to save the life of a scamp called Zhang Chengling. And yet, Zhou Zishu couldn't make sense of it himself. He had only met Zhang Chengling by chance; what was his life to Zhou Zishu?

As if Zhou Zishu had nothing better to do.

But there were always those occasions, those people, those incidents that called upon a person to meddle despite knowing there was no good in it. Zhou Zishu thought that perhaps this was fate. Otherwise, how could it be that he just happened to meet that kid in a place as large as Jiangnan?

He meandered along the wide avenue, enjoying the sunshine as he strolled around without a purpose. He took in the sights of Dongting until the sun inclined to the west, at which point he walked contentedly into a restaurant to order a jug of wine and a few small dishes. What a fine way to live, he thought; it seemed that he had never had such days in his life—if he wasn't scrambling for his survival, he was scheming to make other people scramble for theirs.

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A young lady was playing a qin and singing. Her face was as bright and clear as her voice, lovely from every perspective. When she finished her song, praise rang out from upstairs and downstairs. The very sight of her was enough to please Zhou Zishu; he took out a silver ingot and generously placed it into her plate. The young lady was initially stunned, but hastened to bow her head and gave him a closed-mouth smile. She curtsied with her hands at her hip<sup>4</sup>, murmured her thanks—Zhou Zishu's spirits lifted even higher.

Suddenly, someone sat down across from him. The arrival spoke evenly, as though nothing was out of the ordinary: "I've come for you to buy me a drink."

Zhou Zishu's temples tightened—the debt collector was here.

Ye Baiyi displayed not a shred of courtesy. In his eyes, commonplace matters like eating and drinking in his company were honors for him to bestow upon others, and for others to receive with reverential gratitude. He certainly had no obligation to demur. Without giving Zhou Zishu a single thought, he called over a waiter and rattled off a whole list of dishes. "Order whatever you want; don't hold back," he said nonchalantly to Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu looked strangely at him, thinking, when did you see me holding back?

Zhou Zishu had some suspicion that this disciple of Gu Seng had deliberately come to empty his pockets. These dishes he just ordered—never mind two people, they might even suffice to feed two pigs.

Ye Baiyi saw that he had no intention of ordering more food. With a sudden flash of understanding, Ye Baiyi said, "Oh, right, you're injured. Of course you won't have a good appetite. Still, I recommend you eat plenty while you still can; you don't have much time left."

Zhou Zishu's expression became stranger still. If this fellow wasn't Gu Seng's disciple, he thought, even beating him like a punching bag from dawn until dusk wouldn't be too harsh for him.

Right at that moment, someone else strode up to them and also pulled up a chair, uninvited, to sit down. He sized up Ye Baiyi with a smile that wasn't quite a smile. "A-Xu, I was wondering where you'd gone all afternoon without even a word, but of course...there's someone else?"

Not even a scrap now remained in Zhou Zishu of the good humor that the young woman's smile had ignited. He asked himself whether he ought to stand, toss out "I'm leaving, the two of you do as you like," and depart. Wen Kexing turned to look at him and asked, through inexplicably clenched teeth, "Who is he?"

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<sup>4</sup> What she's doing is called 福身; a polite and deferential gesture for Chinese women where she puts both hands on her left hip and bows.

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"He's..." Zhou Zishu was just about to say that this was only a chance-met friend, yet as the words formed on his lips, he wondered—why? He didn't understand why he would explain this to Wen Kexing, and so, with a strange expression, he stopped talking.

Ye Baiyi, in contrast, gave Wen Kexing an easygoing nod. "I'm called Ye Baiyi," he said.

Wen Kexing turned, wearing a skin-deep smile, and was about to speak—but Ye Baiyi said unflappably: "I know you. You're the one who set fire to the Zhang child's room that day."

Zhou Zishu's hand stilled uselessly in mid-air, gripping his wine cup. Wen Kexing's smile vanished from his face in an instant. He stared straight at Ye Baiyi, as though staring at an inanimate thing, his body slowly tensing with some indescribable...sinister and deep-set killing intent.

Zhou Zishu shivered. He knitted his brows.

The waiter happened to bring over their dishes at that moment. Wen Kexing's hostility startled him, his hand shook, and he was about to drop his plate. He only saw a white shadow flash across his vision before the nearly-fallen plate settled into the white-robed young master's hands. Not a drop of soup spilled out.

Even Zhou Zishu couldn't make out his movements exactly. Could Ye Baiyi be such a master? If he was Gu Seng's disciple, then that legendary Gu Seng of Changing Mountain...

Cold sweat beaded on Zhou Zishu's back. He realized that the Window of Heaven had an incomplete understanding of the mysterious Gu Seng.

Wen Kexing's pupils contracted in an instant. Though his expression remained still, his killing intent receded without sound or fanfare. He seized up this white-clad young man of...twenty-five? Twenty-six? No, surely his fresh face belied his true age. Then, around thirty? Didn't seem right either...

The man gave him the impression that exactly suited his name<sup>5</sup>: a white, blank void. When he sat there without speaking or moving, he was like a mannequin; nobody could feel his emotions, nor could anyone's emotions sway him. One could sit beside him and yet feel as though he lived in a different world.

Ye Baiyi did not seem at all aware that his single utterance had provoked such an intense reaction from the other two. He busied himself with his food. As the dishes were brought over one by one, Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing's expressions twisted once more.

This disciple of Gu Seng was, without question, a legendary glutton!

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<sup>5</sup> Ye Baiyi: Baiyi (白衣) literally means "white-clothed". It's pretty unusual as a name; I've heard "jianghu baiyi / 江湖白衣" used as a term for a jianghu adventurer.

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He stuffed things into his mouth with every haste. Though his manners were not coarse, his descent left no survivors, as though he positively had not eaten for eight lifetimes. His chopsticks ravaged the table like a plague of locusts, leaving not a morsel for the enemy. Zhou Zishu, who had not even been hungry, and Wen Kexing, who clearly was in no mood to eat, were both inspired to take up their chopsticks with irresistible abandon and taste this restaurant's delicacies.

Ye Baiyi did not put down his chopsticks until the crockery lay scattered across the table, the battlefield was unspeakably devastated, and every dish stood empty. He dabbed at his mouth contentedly, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly in something that could be called a smile. To Zhou Zishu, he said, "Thank you for the hospitality."

After he spoke, he stood up and left at once without any further words.

Zhou Zishu was struck by the thought that Gu Seng of Changming Mountain deserved admiration just for the achievement of being able to support such a devourer.

Wen Kexing suddenly spoke: "What he just said...I really wasn't..."

He halted, as though a little uncertain; he didn't know why he said that. His chest felt tight. He darted his gaze up at Zhou Zishu before looking down again, giving a self-deprecating laugh and shaking his head. With his usual demeanor, he said, "So this is Gu Seng's disciple? I think he's more like a locust."

Zhou Zishu lifted the wine jug and poured himself the meager remainder of its contents, without making a fuss about the issue of arson.

Of course he knew that, if Wen Kexing truly wanted to kill Zhang Chengling, it would be no different from crushing an ant. Certainly he would not set a fire so brazenly, nor choose to do it when nobody was there. Instead of ascribing malice to him, it made more sense to ask what he knew that drove him to do it as a warning.

But the question was, how had Ye Baiyi known?

Yet something else occurred to him at once...Zhou Zishu reached into his robes, and his expression suddenly became extraordinary indeed. He looked up to ask, "It... did you bring enough silver?"

He and Wen Kexing stared at each other.

Author's note:

Uncle Seventh will be making a cameo next chapter ^\_^