

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 1/2023

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cw: mention of torture, ableist language

Chapter 26: Lord Seventh¹

Lush green forests, verdant all year round, blanketed the land. Birds wove in and out of their branches. Mountains stood in an unbroken line, like the spine of a beauty, undulating as far as the eye could see.

This was Nanjiang.

Below an ancient tree, of at least several hundred years, there was a little desk. A Nanjiang youth of ten or so years sat there, studying, with perfect posture. Though he was young, he was determined: he sat there for over a shichen without looking up—as though nothing could interrupt him.

Next to the little desk was a chaise, and a man was resting on it with his eyes closed. He was dressed in the manner of the Central Plains, with wide sleeves and long robes. An aged book lay open on his leg.

A small sable sat at the man's feet. Since nobody paid attention to it, it found desultory amusement in chasing its own tail.

At this moment, a Nanjiang warrior hurried over with a letter in his hand. Seeing this scene, he instinctively quieted his steps and waited in silence.

The man on the chaise opened his eyes at the sound. He looked to be twenty-five or twenty-six, with a pair of peach-blossom eyes that always carried a bit of a smile; truly his features were exquisite beyond compare. The little sable sprang into his arms, climbed onto his shoulder, and brushed his chin with its tail.

The warrior offered the letter with every courtesy. "Lord Seventh, a letter from Steward Song."

Lord Seventh made an assenting noise. He accepted the letter languorously, opened it with little interest, read half of it—and straightened at once, his eyes clearing. "It's him?"

The little sable saw the sheet of paper waving back and forth. Its paw shot out with mischievous intent, but Lord Seventh grabbed its nape and deftly tossed it onto the youth's study desk.

Only then did the young man lift his head. "Dad, who is it?"

Lord Seventh did not give a direct reply. He stood up, paced a few steps, folding up the letter as he made an idle remark: "Lu Ta, do you remember what I told you last time? Of all things under the sun, that which separates must ultimately unite, and that which unites must ultimately separate."

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

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The young man Lu Ta seemed accustomed to his dad's flaw of going off on tangents before getting to the point. He answered cooperatively, "You said that it's like when someone wants to sit after standing for a long time, and when they've sat for a long time it's as though nails have grown on their ass. There's no sense to it; a person can't help bothering with this drudgery as long as they live."

A satisfied smile appeared on Lord Seventh's face. He addressed a nearby puzzled Nanjiang warrior: "Axinlai, go find your Great Sorcerer and ask him if he thinks this saying isn't eminently reasonable."

The warrior Axinlai stared at him blankly. "Eh?"

Lord Seventh was about to speak when someone else chuckled, and said slowly, "Have you gotten so bored again that you're planning to stir up trouble?"

The new arrival was dressed all in black. He held a crow-black, unostentatious scepter. Axinlai hurried to bow at the sight of him. "Great Sorcerer."

The Great Sorcerer made an assenting sound and waved a hand. "Go on now. Beiyuan, stop hassling an honest man."

Lord Seventh passed him the folded letter with a smile. "Guess who honored my shop with his presence—a rare visitor indeed."

The Great Sorcerer showed little interest, but he took the letter anyway. "Hmph. As long as it isn't the Great Qing emperor...oh? Manor Lord Zhou?"

Lord Seventh's smile became wicked. "Little Venom, why don't we make a visit to the Great Plains? Shouldn't we risk it all when an old friend needs help?"

When the Great Sorcerer saw his mischievous expression, he said nothing, but he thought to himself that this man clearly only wanted to enjoy the spectacle—if he could risk a friend along the way, so much the better.

At this time, Zhou Zishu had not yet realized the consequences of his ill-advised friendship. He was stuck in a practical quandary; this glutton Ye Baiyi had granted him an unannounced honor that left him short on the bill.

After he and Wen Kexing stared at one another for a moment, Zhou Zishu understood a fundamental principle: if Wen Kexing could be relied on, then sows could climb trees. He considered himself quite unfortunate to have met these two creatures. An infamous glutton and an infamous freeloader—a divine pair to be sure.

Wen Kexing sensed Zhou Zishu's uncharitable gaze and involuntarily pulled his lapels tighter. In a small voice, he said, "I might sell my virtue, but I won't sell my body; don't leave me here as payment."

"Then what do you think we should do?" Zhou Zishu asked.

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Wen Kexing said, "It's your bill, so I suggest you sell yourself to cover the debt."

Zhou Zishu spoke through gritted teeth. "I'm not some fucking maiden. Who's buying? You?"

Wen Kexing's eyes lit up at once. "Of course! I'll sell everything and pawn the shirt off my back for the opportunity!"

Zhou Zishu lowered his voice. "Then why don't you sell everything and pawn the shirt off your back to pay off this bill?"

Wen Kexing fell silent for a while. Finally, he said, "A-Xu, I think we'd better make a run for it."

Zhou Zishu turned away without speaking. Though he had always made his fortune by stealing from the rich, he still had a scrap of conscience that troubled him at the thought of running out on his bill, and... as he gazed at Wen Kexing's shameless countenance, he felt that he could not afford to lose this bit of dignity.

As he turned, he glimpsed someone entering the restaurant's main entrance. Zhou Zishu's spirits revived at once. He called out, "Miss Gu, thank goodness!"

Gu Xiang was heading inside and, until she heard him, had not spotted these two. The color immediately drained out of her face. She spun around to leave, but she wasn't fast enough to escape Wen Kexing—who already stood in front of her. "A-Xiang, why are you running?" He asked mildly.

Gu Xiang struggled for a while, ashen faced, before managing to spit out a sentence: "M...master, I...I just walked in the wrong door is all."

Wen Kexing patted her shoulder and pulled her inside. His voice had a consoling tone: "No harm done. You're here now."

Gu Xiang's whole body was covered in goosebumps. Her master's kindness surely concealed some devious treachery—yet she couldn't escape, only follow him one step at a time, shaking as though she was mounting the executioner's block. Wen Kexing brought her to their table and asked, "Did you bring money?"

Gu Xiang immediately brought out all her copper, silver pieces, ingots, gold leaf, and bank notes. Wen Kexing nodded in satisfaction and, at last, called magnanimously: "Waiter, bring us the bill!"

Gu Xiang's heart wept. No wonder the fortune-teller said she would have to spend a fortune to avert disaster...Amitabha².

So it was that Wen Kexing, likely out of gratitude, allowed Gu Xiang to become his shadow again and did not drive her away. Zhou Zishu walked in front of them,

² Gu Xiang invokes Buddha's name "Amitabha/ e mi tuo fo" similar to how people say, "my goodness".

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pondering all the while, until he suddenly turned to ask a direct question: "Wen-xiong, why did you set fire to the Zhang kid's room that night?"

Gu Xiang blanched. "Master, you actually committed murder and arson?!"

Wen Kexing responded with a straight face, "I was reading his fortune in the stars, and I saw that the kid would face bloody ruin unless fire pulled him from his path. So that was my good deed for the day."

He saw Zhou Zishu and Gu Xiang's unimpressed expressions as soon as he finished speaking, so he continued, "I never attach my name to good deeds; there's no need to shower me with praise like this."

"Master, can you read my fortune for me?" Asked Gu Xiang.

"Bloody ruin upon you," said Wen Kexing, "unless you shut up for a day."

Sure enough, Gu Xiang didn't dare talk anymore.

They returned to the place where the ghost had been pilloried earlier that day. Nearly everyone had dispersed, including the ghost; rumor said that he had been crippled, that he would never again perform martial arts, that someone had impaled his shoulder blade and locked him up. Cao Weining, who had been searching for their group with Zhang Chengling in tow, ran up to them.

"Zhou-xiong, this Zhang kid said that you're his shi..." His words suddenly halted. He stared, with mouth agape, at Gu Xiang—standing behind Wen Kexing—and could not speak anymore.

Gu Xiang blinked uncomprehendingly, yet Cao Weining could only stare in a daze. Zhou Zishu had to cough once to snap Cao Weining out of it. His whole face went red as he mumbled, "M-miss, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, r-really..."

Gu Xiang was baffled. This kid probably wasn't in his right mind, she thought. Cao Weining suddenly stepped back, rattling on like a mosquito: "I'm s-surnamed Cao, called Weining, from Taixing, of the Qingfeng Sword Sect's 'Wei' generation, and the leader of Qingfeng Sword Sect Mo Huaiyang is my s-shifu..."

Gu Xiang looked him up and down. She asked Wen Kexing, "Master, what's wrong with him?"

Cao Weining had not managed to stammer out his whole lineage before his pure, youthful affections lay shattered before him.

Zhou Zishu glanced at Zhang Chengling as though he had just thought of something. "Come with me, kid," he said. Zhang Chengling was beyond delighted to find that he was not driven away on sight, and bounced after Zhou Zishu. Wen Kexing patted Cao Weining's shoulder. He, too, left to go inside with Gu Xiang.

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When Gu Xiang walked by Cao Weining, he sensed a wisp of her fragrance, and it turned his brain straight to mush. He was dazed; he did not awaken until they had walked away. He said, as though dreaming: “*Guan-guan* sings the river hawk from the other side of the water, in the north there lives a fair lady...a gentleman's fine match³...to think that the world contains such a beautiful girl, such a...”

He stumbled away, sighing with each step, fully intending to go home and nurse his feelings.

Only when they had gone a long way did Gu Xiang speak quietly to Wen Kexing: “Master, Lao Meng came as well. He told me to tip you off about the next step...”

Wen Kexing did not stop walking, nor did he look back. Though the corners of his mouth turned up, no smile lines appeared at the corners of his eyes. Lightly, he said, “Does Lao Meng need me to tell him what to do?”

“...Right.”

Zhou Zishu brought Zhang Chengling back to his own room in taciturn silence. When they arrived, he gave a curt nod. “Sit down, I have something to ask you.”

Zhang Chengling sat obediently. “What does shifu want to ask?”

Zhou Zishu thought for a moment, and said, “The man from the other day, the one with the demon palm mark on his face, did he ask you whether you've seen a man who was missing a finger?”

Zhang Chengling nodded. Zhou Zishu pressed further: “Have you?”

Zhang Chengling shook his head. “Shifu, who was he talking about?” He asked.

Zhou Zishu crossed his legs. He tapped his knee with his index finger, not answering this question. Missing a finger...rumor said that Hanging Ghost Xue Fang was short one finger. This was what had convinced Zhou Zishu that the black-robed man Gu Xiang killed at the ruined temple could not be Hanging Ghost.

But what did the red-clad Ghost of Joyous Lamentation mean by this?

After a moment, he spoke slower and with uncharacteristic seriousness. “Kid, think hard. Did you see anything unusual that night?”

“That night”, of course, referred to the night the entire Zhang family was murdered. Zhang Chengling's breath came in short, quick bursts, so Zhou Zishu softened his voice: “Don't panic. Think about it carefully; I'm afraid it's very important.”

³ Cao Weining has mixed lines from “Fishhawk” and “Reeds” from the Book of Songs, as well as Li Yannian's “Ode to a Beauty”.

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Zhang Chengling's face paled. He shook his head after a long time. With tears in his voice, he said, "Shifu, you ask me what was unusual, but was there anything normal about that day?"

Zhou Zishu knit his brows. He did not push anymore, only fell silent for a moment. Then: "I'll teach you a phrase to help you remember your forms. Think about it when you go back and when you train. If you don't understand something, you can come ask me."

Zhang Chengling was dumbstruck.

Zhou Zishu continued, "It's better to stick close to Sir Zhao these days. Don't go off on your own, and don't leave Gao Manor. Understand?"

Zhang Chengling's eyes widened. "Shifu... thank you so much, shifu!"

Zhou Zishu coughed uneasily. He scolded, "Stop babbling. Make sure you remember this; I'm only telling you once. I won't say it a second time if you forget."