

Chapter 28: Gu Seng¹

Wen Kexing shot her an icy look and said, venomously, “When did my affairs become your business?”

His tone was uncharacteristically nasty. Gu Xiang froze for a moment, her eyes wide, then flipped herself off the roof beam in one swift motion. She had stuck with Wen Kexing since she was little. She knew that, even though he expected instant obedience on important things, it wasn't as though he couldn't take a joke. Gu Xiang had gotten used to being cheeky and playing around with him; she had never seen him turn on her like this. She didn't know what was wrong.

Gu Xiang assessed him cautiously, speaking in a soft voice, “Master, you're...”

Wen Kexing fell silent for a long time. He finally took a deep breath, but his vexation did not leave him. He leaned slightly against the windowsill, exposing himself to the cold wind. He did not look at Gu Xiang, only said tonelessly, “The way you tell it, since I'm not interested in any women, should I only divide men into handsome ones to bed and ugly ones to kill? Can't I have one or two friends I can talk to?”

He hadn't intended to intimidate Gu Xiang, but she became even more frightened when she couldn't understand what he was thinking of. She could only mumble, “Yes; this one has spoken out of turn.”

Wen Kexing was about to speak, but when he saw Gu Xiang's uncomprehending face, he swallowed his words again. There was no point in talking to her; it was like he was speaking a different language. Wen Kexing felt, in that moment, the delayed injustice of it. All these years people looked at him and either feared him or saw him as an unreasoning madman. How many could sit beside a bonfire in the middle of the night to listen to him sing an off-tune ditty, or tell a story that nobody understood except himself?

Suddenly, he asked, “A-Xiang, do you think I'm a lunatic?”

Gu Xiang racked her brains for a good long while. She wouldn't study when she was little, and nobody forced her to stretch her brain, so—while she happily ran free—she was hardly well-read. Only now did she discover that it was good to have a little book learning. It seemed as though she had a thousand things to say but didn't know how to start.

She could only think of one thing, so she blurted it out, “It's okay if you're a lunatic. I still think it's better with you than anybody else.”

Wen Kexing looked at her. After a long time, he smiled slightly.

¹ Thanks as always to yuer for reading with me, and thanks to the big brained THC groupchat for helping me refine the tone!

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 4/2023

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His lonely smile emboldened Gu Xiang, and she blurted out something else: "Master, I think you're really.... really a good person."

Wen Kexing laughed out loud. He nodded. "All right. You've talked nonsense all night, and you've finally said something reasonable." He pushed open the window as soon as he finished speaking, preparing to leap out of it.

Gu Xiang said hurriedly, "Where are you going, master?"

Wen Kexing waved his hand. "This pretty boy Ye Baiyi—pretty boys hardly ever mean well, so I think he might get the better of that little Zhou idiot. I'll follow them to keep an eye on things."

He vanished without a trace before Gu Xiang could even respond. It was a while before Gu Xiang recovered her senses and understood who "that little Zhou idiot" was meant to be. Her expression immediately lit up; she said to herself, "Now I know what it means to lie through your teeth. Little idiot...little idiot...huh, then I'm the stupidest girl in the world!"

It was unfortunate that nobody heard, or someone would certainly have reminded her: though Gu Xiang only intended to poke fun, her declaration had quite a bit of truth in it.

Having summoned Zhou Zishu out in the middle of the night, Ye Baiyi did not explain what they were going to do. He dashed through the night with incredible speed; his qinggong mastery made him as quick as lightning. Zhou Zishu was shocked to realize that, if this man wasn't deliberately waiting for him, he would've been left behind already.

They ran one behind the other for who knew how long before Ye Baiyi halted, placed his hands behind his back, and turned to face Zhou Zishu in profile. Zhou Zishu didn't know why he had suddenly brought them to this deserted crossroad. But at that moment, a guess popped into his mind, so he stood two paces away from him—neither close nor far—bewildered, uncertain, trying to size him up.

Ye Baiyi allowed this examination without explaining his purpose. This man had a tall, upright figure. White clothes usually made people look either graceful and ethereal, exceedingly lovely—or frivolous and pretentious. This was a feather-light color. No matter who wore it, they would seem lighter as well. Yet somehow Ye Baiyi weighed the color down.

In the scant light of evening, he looked like an ancient Buddha statue—Zhou Zishu suddenly felt, without any evidence, that his weapon should be a heavy sword. Even if Mt. Tai collapsed before his eyes, he could stand still, unshaken.

After a long time, Ye Baiyi finally asked, "Have you figured anything out?"

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Zhou Zishu was startled. Now he understood where his sense of ill-ease came from. Impulsively, he inclined his head: "Forgive this youngster's blindness; I have given my elder much offense these past few days."

Ye Baiyi fell silent. Suddenly, without a word, his hand shot out—his palm struck Zhou Zishu's left shoulder head-on with surprising speed and strength, with no hint of forbearance.

Zhou Zishu flinched. He evaded—leaped two zhang into the air—but Ye Baiyi pursued him without missing a beat, his long sleeves fanning out, completely cornering Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu knew that Ye Baiyi's martial arts must be first-rate; with his own strength reduced by half, he couldn't afford to meet him head-on. So he wanted to lean on his unsurpassed qinggong to lead him in circles. That was how he discovered that he had made a mistake. His opponent's strikes were nigh inescapable; his fists seemed to be everywhere. Zhou Zishu had nowhere to brace himself mid-air, so—in desperation—he raised his leg to aim a kick at Ye Baiyi's wrist.

Ye Baiyi wasn't fazed in the slightest. He flipped his hand to grab Zhou Zishu's calf; Zhou Zishu spun, the momentum just barely allowing him to clear his jump. He glided through the air like falling petals—and landed hard, skidding two chi as he came down. His expression had changed. He spoke seriously and deliberately: "Sir, what do you mean by this?"

Ye Baiyi drew his hand back, sizing up Zhou Zishu for a while as though nothing had happened. "That 'Qin Song of the Melodic Melody' was an old good-for-nothing's disciple, and he himself was even more of a mincing ninny, so his master turfed him out. I heard that his only real ability was playing music. To think that a single note of yours lay decades of his training to waste, I thought a formidable young man had risen in the jianghu, but now I see it's... boy, let me ask you, is your weapon a flexible sword?"

Zhou Zishu's eyes flew open. He darted a few half-steps to the side, his hand reflexively reaching into his sleeve, murder rising in his heart as it had scarcely ever done—this was the first time an opponent had read him so thoroughly while he knew so little about them.

Seeing this, the corners of Ye Baiyi's mouth turned upwards in a stiff yet mocking smile. He sneered, "If I wanted to do something to you, could you still stand there and speak? That bit of qinggong you showed just now couldn't have come from any other place. It's called 'leave not a trace, soar without bounds'. Siji Manor's Qin Huaizhang is your shifu, isn't he? Hmph. Master and disciple both alike. You make a scoundrel out of everyone you meet."

Zhou Zishu replied coldly, "Master Gu Seng is a martial legend, but my master has long departed this world. Unfilial as I may be, I will not hear him insulted like this."

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Ye Baiyi was shocked. "What," he cried out, "Qin Huaizhang is dead?"

Zhou Zishu didn't have a chance to speak before Ye Baiyi's gaze dimmed and became vacant. Quietly, "Yes, it's been who knows how many years...how dynasties come and go²...seasons never touch the mountain, but a thousand years pass so quickly in the mortal world. Even Qin Huaizhang is gone."

Zhou Zishu furrowed his brows. He studied Ye Baiyi for a moment; when he realized that there was no ill-intent—as before, Ye Baiyi merely did not know how to speak courteously—he relaxed very slightly.

He was certain that this was the legendary Gu Seng of Changming Mountain, yet he didn't know how Ye Baiyi had managed to maintain a youthful appearance for so many years. Could it be that the rumors were true, and he had ascended to immortality?

Ye Baiyi held out his hand. "Let me look at your sword."

Seeing that Zhou Zishu didn't move, Ye Baiyi became impatient. "Do you think I haven't seen it before? I was the one who gave it to your shifu back then. Nobody wants to steal your things. I can't even have a look? How can Qin Huaizhang's disciple be so despicable!"

Zhou Zishu realized only then the significance of the "Baiyi" carved on his sword. He originally took it for some strange motto, but all along it was this fellow's name. His expression became sour as his stomach turned somersaults. He reluctantly thrust his hand into his waistband, fiddled with something, and a flexible sword of exceeding brightness fell into his grasp. He passed it to Ye Baiyi.

Ye Baiyi glanced that yellowed, shriveled hand. He accepted the sword with a frown, but he continued scolding: "You just had to cover a human face with another layer of skin. Are you a man or a devil? I can't stand you and your shifu's sneaky ways."

Zhou Zishu held his tongue—he knew when to pick his battles—yet he still thought, get a load of this old bastard!

Ye Baiyi grasped the flexible sword in his hand and suffused the blade with his inner qi. The blade straightened, trembling a little as though resonating with something. It hummed. Ye Baiyi's slender eyes flashed with bitter remembrance. He looked at the sword that was named Baiyi. My old friend is gone, he thought, yet these things have outlived him and even passed on to the next generation.

He returned it to Zhou Zishu after a long while.

² Ye Baiyi is referencing Tao Yuanming (365 – 427)'s "Chronicles of Paradise" 《桃花源记》. The inhabitants of Paradise keep to themselves, so they don't know about any worldly events after the Qin dynasty. The expression he uses here ("ignorant of the Han Dynasty, not to speak of the Wei and Jin") has fallen into common use to describe someone so isolated that they don't keep up with worldly news.

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Zhou Zishu gave a shallow smile. "Aside from testing my ability and my sect, I wonder if my elder called me out here in the middle of the night for some other..."

He hadn't finished his sentence before Ye Baiyi's hand shot out to cover his chest. The movement was so quick that he had no time to react; if the other man had wanted to hurt him, he couldn't have evaded it. Zhou Zishu froze, his words immediately halted.

But Ye Baiyi made no other moves. He only furrowed his brows slightly; Zhou Zishu felt a touch of gentle qi radiating from his palm as though it was searching for something in his body. It disturbed the Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns, which began wreaking their havoc; Zhou Zishu felt a touch of cold sweat, but he endured it and did not reveal anything.

Ye Baiyi suddenly pushed. The qi that had been pressing against Zhou Zishu's chest transformed from a stream into a river's deluge, pouring into his already half-wasted meridians. Zhou Zishu felt as though the qi knocked the nail in his chest upside down. His vision went dark, his whole body swayed, and he fell backwards.

A figure flashed out behind him, calling, "What are you doing?!" He caught Zhou Zishu; with a flick of his sleeve he made to slap Ye Baiyi's hand aside—Ye Baiyi made a surprised sound, but he didn't relent—the two of them collided. Ye Baiyi felt that the opposing qi was strange and unpolished; something shook slightly within him, something tightened in his chest.

Wen Kexing was even more surprised. He had put nearly eighty percent of his power into his strike, but it ran into what felt like an invisible wall. He had been entirely deflected. He grasped Zhou Zishu's waist tight, retreated half a step—shifted to shield Zhou Zishu, and steadied himself in the same motion.

Only then did he examine Ye Baiyi, all the humor gone from his narrowed eyes. This look of his made Ye Baiyi think of venomous snakes—cold, dark; once fastened to its target, utterly unshakable.