

Chapter 30: Rainy Night¹

Gu Xiang held an umbrella over her head in one hand and clutched another to her chest as she darted through the evening rain. Her little embroidered shoes splashed on the wet cobblestones, soaking the bottoms of her trousers. A chill wind made her shiver. Truly, she thought, she was loyal and dutiful to a fault.

She looked up, then, and saw a man walking alone in the rain with his head down.

Wen Kexing was already soaked through. His clothes stuck to his body, his collar was loosened, and he cut a wretched figure indeed—yet this didn't seem to bother him at all.

Gu Xiang hurried up to him, calling, "Master!"

Though Wen Kexing didn't turn back to look at her, it was clear that he had heard; he halted for a moment and waited for her. Gu Xiang ran to him and passed him the umbrella, thinking all the while that it hadn't been worth it to brave the harsh wind and bitter rain—knowing her honorable master, he had surely gone to enjoy himself in some disreputable place and ended up in his current state.

So she set her mouth and asked, a little disapprovingly: "Master, where did you spread your charms this time?"

Wen Kexing pushed the umbrella open. He walked a few steps before responding quietly: "I got into a fight."

"In bed?" Gu Xiang's reply slipped right out of her mouth.

As Wen Kexing glanced back at her, Gu Xiang immediately took the hint—she gave herself a light smack across the face, and declared: "Shit, listen to your stupid mouth, what are you going on about now? Are you allowed to just tell the truth like this? Next you'll want to bring up how the sun rises in the east..."

"A-Xiang." Wen Kexing cut her off, having no mind for her jokes. Gu Xiang blinked a couple times. It was raining even harder now, the falling water raising a layer of mist that somewhat obscured Wen Kexing's expression. He remained silent for a long time before casting his glance down, murmuring: "He said... he's about to die."

Gu Xiang gave an *ah*, but she hadn't quite understood. "Who's about to die?" She asked.

"Zhou Xu."

Wen Kexing's voice halted again. As he continued walking, he forced his voice to sound level in his explanation—perhaps to shift his own mood, or perhaps to make Gu Xiang understand. "He has some internal wound. I saw how lively he was, so at first, I thought it was nothing; I just found out today that it's not curable. He's only got two or three

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

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years left. When I heard that, I knew who he was... ah, if I knew earlier, why would I have followed him?"

Gu Xiang widened her eyes. She seemed to have some trouble digesting this news, and could only mumble, after a long pause: "Zhou Xu?"

"Mm." Wen Kexing assented softly. "I used to think he couldn't have been in the 'Window of Heaven'. Nobody can leave that place once they've gone in; anyone who tries to leave has to take the seven 'Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns'. Then they'll lose all their martial arts, all six of their senses, a broken fool who can keep a secret even better than a dead man. I thought that someone who had taken the Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns couldn't possibly act like he did... I only realized, when I heard someone else talk about it today, that he probably had some special trick; he lessened the harm in those thrice-damned nails, but he still won't live more than three years."

Gu Xiang listened, for once, without hardly daring to breathe. Only at this point did she ask: "Master... how did you know?"

"I?" Wen Kexing chuckled, but it had a strange sound. "Could I have lived so long if I didn't know a few things here and there?"

Gu Xiang was struck dumb for a moment, but she rallied with another question: "That... that Zhou Xu, he..."

"I've seen someone who left the Window of Heaven before." Wen Kexing paused for an instant before continuing, "Nobody could escape the punishment to become a living corpse, but he did. I thought he must have ranked at head steward, or higher, perhaps even... maybe he was the previous commander."

Gu Xiang wondered at this. "If he was the commander, then why would he want to leave..." Her words suddenly halted, as though she had suddenly realized something; her mouth sealed up tightly.

Wen Kexing sped up his gait as though he wanted to leave something far behind him. Gu Xiang was short, with short legs, and could only keep up at a jog. The two of them didn't speak for a long time. As Wen Kexing walked faster and faster, Gu Xiang suddenly asked, "Master, are you heartbroken?"

Wen Kexing didn't even glance back. Light and airy, he asked: "Heartbroken about what?"

Gu Xiang thought it over. Yes, that was right, she really couldn't figure out what Wen Kexing was heartbroken about.

He laughed quietly. He was walking so quickly now that his feet barely seemed to brush the ground. "With a disguise on his face, I can't tell if he's really beautiful... anyway, I

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like them sweet-smelling, soft, and smooth-skinned—even if he did have a lovely face, it wouldn't suit me.”

Gu Xiang was having trouble keeping up now, even with the aid of her qinggong. She blurted out: “Master, didn't you clearly say that you like tall ones with narrow waists and a pair of good-looking shoulder blades...”

“You misremembered,” Wen Kexing interrupted her. When he continued speaking, he didn't know who he was explaining for: “It's just... misery loves company—A-Xiang, don't follow me.”

In the time it took for Gu Xiang to yelp in surprise, Wen Kexing's figure flashed and reappeared thirty feet away. Gu Xiang felt herself wronged indeed. “Master,” she shouted, “How come? Did I upset you again?”

Wen Kexing had already vanished into the rain, leaving just a few words echoing in her ears: “You talk too much.”

Poor Gu Xiang was left all alone. She stomped her feet with great resentment. “That's all the thanks I get!”

When she gazed up, towards where Wen Kexing had vanished, she suddenly remembered how he had looked—soaked through with rain, his back facing her, his broad shoulders held straight, hurrying along in the rain without trembling—without even waiting for her. Nobody accompanied him, yet he strode onward with his eyes fixed ahead, as though he had walked alone for many leagues already.

She started to feel a little sorry for him.

Fine, misery loves company, whatever you'd like... but in the end, that man was as ephemeral as morning dew; in two years, three years, wouldn't he flicker out of existence?

As the chill rain swept through Xiling, the streetside homes—with their flickering lights—lit the way until the end of the road. How could those ties have already grown too tight to cut?² Who was there in this world who could hail good fortune with a song, and accept bad fortune with a shrug? Drink today's wine with no care for tomorrow?

Can you?

Nobody knew where Wen Kexing had gone that night.

At daybreak, as the sky had just begun to grow light, someone hammered on Zhou Zishu's door. When he pulled it open, Cao Weining nearly crashed into him.

² Wen Kexing's internal voice is, characteristically, paraphrasing an existing story and reshaping it for his own circumstances. These sentences use phrases from the Tang poet Li He's poem, “The Tomb of Little Su”, a lamentation for the death of a famous courtesan.

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As Cao Weining dashed out with Zhou Zishu in tow, he said, "To think I'd find you comfortable in your room! That disciple of yours is about to lose his life!"

"Who?" Zhou Zishu had passed an extraordinarily chaotic night, feeling as though his mind hadn't cleared yet. He caught on after a moment, furrowing his brow, "You mean Zhang Chengling? What's the blasted matter with him now? Why is it always him?"

Cao Weining sighed. "I think it must be his fated year. One thing after another, I don't know why so many people won't let him rest—someone unexpectedly broke in last night to kill him, but luckily the noise alerted Sir Zhao next door, and they caught that brigand. But he was a death warrior, so he swallowed poison as soon as he was caught. Do you think..."

Cao Weining's voice halted, as though he harbored some doubts; he recalled what his shishu Mo Huaikong had said that morning—with so many storied personages assembled at Dongting, who could possibly want to make so much trouble for a child of no particular interest? Instead of wanting to exterminate his whole family, it was more like wanting to silence a witness.

Cao Weining was simple-minded, but even he felt a faint prickle of unease. There was something wrong about the atmosphere—though it seemed as though Gao Chong and the others had taken the situation under control, doubt and conjecture circulated nebulously like a plague.

What exactly was the Glazed Spiral?

By the time Zhou Zishu's group hurried onto the scene, a massive crowd surrounded Zhang Chengling and Zhao Jing's rooms. Zhao Jing was naked from the waist up, and his shoulder was covered in blood. He sat at a long wooden bench that was placed to the side. Someone was dressing his wound. The master's face was exceedingly wan. The blade that hung at his side had not yet been wiped clean of blood.

Two dead people lay on the ground, purple-faced; it seemed that they had taken poison. A hook lay beside one of the corpses. Zhou Zishu recognized it immediately—the hook of the Scorpions.

In fact, the Scorpions could be divided into tiers depending on how much their client paid. A cheaper price bought the gang that had helped the Ghost of Joyous Lamentation lure out Zhang Chengling: they only completed their task; they didn't stake their lives. If the client paid a large sum, they could buy Scorpions who pledged themselves unto death.

Anyone targeted by these devoted Scorpions was in for a world of trouble. They wouldn't know how many would be sent against them; one failed wave only heralded another wave to come. It was an endless struggle against fighters that weren't afraid to die; if they accomplished their mission, they would return and eat well; if they didn't, they would give up their lives.

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The price for such an undertaking was certainly not cheap.

Who had spent so much money to kill Zhang Chengling? Did they think that this little brat, who couldn't do anything except cry, was some kind of prodigy? Or did they expect him to grow into one?

A strange thought burst into Zhou Zishu's mind. All these years I've muddled along, he thought, I can't even count how many people want me dead. But I've never received such relentless first-rate attempts on my life.

For a moment, the gaze he swept over Zhang Chengling held a trace of affection.

That young man was standing in a corner. Contrary to Zhou Zishu's expectations, he didn't seem extremely disturbed, nor did he show any signs of terror. He kept his head down, as though looking at the two corpses, yet he also seemed to be thinking about something else. The top of his head was showing; he had a single hair whorl. He was very quiet; whenever someone asked him a question, he nodded or shook his head without speaking much.

Gao Chong gave the suggestion of a bow as he asked Zhang Chengling, pleasantly, "Chengling, do you recognize these people?"

Zhang Chengling glanced at him before looking down again, shaking his head.

Gao Chong softened his voice and patted Zhang Chengling's head. "Don't be afraid, kid. All these uncles and elders are here to look out for you. Tell me, did these rogues say anything to you last night?"

Zhang Chengling didn't meet his eyes, only shaking his head in response to the question. Gao Chong seemed a bit confused as well. Right then, someone cut in with a sinister tone: "Sir Gao, what's the use of asking these questions? Folks with a few years on them all know that these two were Scorpion death warriors. They're just knives for killing. Can weapons talk? What a joke! You'd better ask that kid if he knows something we don't know."

The one who spoke was Feng Xiaofeng. He was not sitting on Gao Shannu's shoulder this time; instead, he sat on the ground. His short stature forced him to tilt his head up so far that it looked like he was trying to catch raindrops in his nostrils. His posture perfectly complemented his obnoxious manner. With his arms crossed, he practically invited someone to beat him even flatter.

Gao Shannu stood behind him without speaking a word. His fierce, boorish face made him look every inch like a grotesque gargoyle.

Even Gao Chong raised his eyebrows at this. Zhao Jing lost his temper entirely. He stood up, pointed straight at Feng Xiaofeng's nose, and railed angrily, "You blasted dwarf, did a dog eat your conscience? How could you say these things?"

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Feng Xiaofeng smiled coldly. "Sir Zhao, you haven't taken a single step from the Zhang orphan since you've taken him in hand. Why exactly did you keep him next to you like he's some kind of prize? You know what's going on. Don't treat us like we're idiots!"

Feng Xiaofeng's blazing eyes fixed on Zhang Chengling, who still wouldn't look up. Raising his voice, Feng Xiaofeng said, "Kid, tell us the truth. Do you know where the Zhang family's Glazed Spiral is? Do you have it? Did this Zhao... heh, did Sir Zhao swallow it up?"

Zhao Jing roared, "Dwarf Feng, I'll fuck eighteen generations of your ancestors!"

Gao Shannu suddenly cast an angry glower at Zhao Jing. Feng Xiaofeng waved his hand, and Gao Shannu returned to his post behind him. Then, Feng Xiaofeng said, "Sir Zhao, aren't you lowering yourself? Haven't you heard that a hit dog will holler?"

Zhao Jing really wanted to let himself loose and teach that one a lesson.

Gao Chong hurried to stop him. In a low voice, he said, "Brother Feng, it's best to avoid baseless claims, it'll damage goodwill—come, someone take these bodies away, we can take our time to talk about everything else..."

At this moment, someone else spoke up. "Sir Gao, you always take these things behind close doors. Who do you think deserves to listen? Let's ask this kid to tell us everything while everyone's here. Isn't it better for him this way, and won't it save us from a few days of worrying about our own lives?"

Zhang Chengling looked up. His face was very pale, and his eyes were dull. He felt as though everyone was looking at him, everyone was pointing at him, and everyone was forcing him to—explain things to them—but he really didn't know anything.

Zhou Zishu had always been accustomed to hiding in crowds; hardly anybody could ever notice him. At that moment, jammed into that throng, seeing Zhang Chengling's helpless, dazed expression, a sudden burst of anger swelled within him.

He wanted to push everyone aside, pull that young man out, and take him away from this corrupt place full of rotten secrets. But would he still be Zhou Zishu if he did that? *Think before you act* was carved into his bones. Prudence above everything else, in matters big or small; concealing himself in the shadows, and never bursting onto the scene.

That year, even the emperor had remarked that he operated with more and more steadiness, without the slightest crack in his designs... and yet that old creature Ye Baiyi told him he was showing his cards.