

Chapter 16: A Nimble Fox¹

So it was that two travelers became three once more. Dongting was one of Zhou Zishu's destinations anyway, so he did not raise many objections.

Some people were simply made to eat their fill and loll around until dark. Even if you asked him to think deeper, he couldn't do it—his brain would hurt if you forced him. Such a person was Cao Weining. Some other people, however, always studied the situation more deeply than others. It was their habit to think too much. Perhaps their minds wandered down innumerable paths before they even realized what was happening. Such a person was Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing continuously bickered back and forth. Whenever they had an idle moment, one would taunt and the other would tease. They probed at each other unceasingly. Yet Cao Weining listened to all this with foolish happiness, summing it up as follows: "These two share a true affection."

Zhou Zishu shut up at once to look at Cao Weining. He was utterly speechless. He thought, the Qingfeng Sword sect leader Mo Huaiyang was a sly old fox; how could a big rabbit emerge from a fox den?

Wen Kexing seized the advantage. He grabbed Zhou Zishu's shoulder as he smiled at Cao Weining: "Many thanks to young master Cao. Truthfully, I've made up my mind in this life to take no hand in marriage except Zhou Xu's."

Cao Weining's mouth hung open as round as his eyes.

Zhou Zishu's reply came as readily as though he did this every day. "I'm afraid I must disappoint Wen-xiong's generous love. This humble one unfortunately suffers from an incurable sickness, and won't live longer than a few years. My feeble neck can't take the weight of Wen-xiong's regard. Why not choose someone else? Sweet grass grows everywhere on the plains."

"If you pass away," Wen Kexing said seriously, "I'll spend my final days in desolate solitude."

Zhou Zishu's smile hid a sharp edge. "An intellect of your caliber can have no equal. Since the heavens have consigned you to solitude, how can an ordinary person like me contradict their wishes?"

Wen Kexing displayed not a drop of shame. "Nonsense. A-Xu, you're too courteous to disparage yourself this way."

Zhou Zishu waved him off. "Not at all—I haven't been courteous in the slightest."

¹ Thanks as always to yuer for reading with me, and the THC groupchat for ongoing support and brainstorming!

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Cao Weining's gaze flitted between them for a long time. When he finally gathered himself, he blurted out, "...Is it because of Zhou-xiong's illness, that the pair of you can't join in blissful matrimony²?"

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu were both struck silent for a moment. Wen Kexing gave a snicker, thinking that Cao Weining was truly extraordinary.

The silence stretched for some time before Zhou Zishu coughed and removed Wen Kexing's arm from his shoulder. Solemnly, he said, "Cao-xiong doesn't need to worry. There's no way Wen-xiong and I will ever join in matrimony. An estranged pair, if anything."

Cao Weining thought that he was forcing a cheery demeanor. After thinking for a moment with his brows scrunched, Cao Weining said with profound sorrow, "Such a character as Zhou-xiong should not suffer these hardships."

Zhou Zishu laughed bitterly. "Much thanks, Cao-xiong, but I don't think so at all..."

"My teacher has always had dealings with unusual jianghu figures," Cao Weining said. "He's had the good fortune to know a few seniors from the Mystic Healer Valley. If Zhou-xiong doesn't mind, after we've attended the Dongting gathering and polished off the vicious criminals, would you return with me? My shifu surely will know what to do."

Zhou Zishu was moved almost to tears. He had nothing to say.

Unexpectedly, Cao Weining was a man of action. He immediately stood and clasped his fist in salute at both of them. "Please wait for me at the next inn. I'll send word to my shishu at once."

He turned to go as soon as he finished speaking. Wen Kexing clicked his tongue in astonishment. "Now I have seen, in my own lifetime, what the sages called 'warm-blooded'."

Wen Kexing turned back and—seeing that Zhou Zishu was staring at him thoughtfully—he halted. "What, A-Xu, did I move your stone heart when I bared mine? You're going to promise yourself to me?"

Zhou Zishu's lip curled. "Forgive my dullness. Wen-xiong's motivation for going to Dongting... are truly impenetrable to me."

Wen Kexing replied with a completely straight face. "To save people from danger, to help the needy; these are small merits. Do you know what a great merit is?"

Zhou Zishu narrowed his eyes, watching without saying a word.

² Cao Weining is here quoting from Wang Shifu's *Romance of the West Chamber* (approx. 1295-1307). The phrase he quotes is commonly used to congratulate newlyweds or otherwise to celebrate an eternal union between lovers.

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Wen Kexing gave a leisurely reply. "As long as hell is occupied, I won't go to heaven³. Good and evil can never coexist, don't you think?" He fixed his serene gaze in the far distance as he spoke. All traces of his usual joking air had vanished from his handsome profile. He resembled nothing so much as a stone Buddha that showed neither grief nor joy.

"This is the human world," he continued. "It shouldn't have demons and ghouls in it. That... Sir Gao, Gao Chong, so renowned in virtue and deeds—he's rooting out evil for the common people. If we don't lend a hand, won't I have studied holy books all these years for nothing? I've heard that it takes many pious years to get one chance at humanity⁴. If I don't do something extraordinary, won't I have wasted those decades?"

When Zhou Zishu didn't respond, Wen Kexing turned back and pressed him. "A-Xu, don't you think so?"

There was a long pause. Zhou Zishu finally gave a quiet chuckle. "To hear Wen-xiong speak, I would think you a man of honor."

Wen Kexing suddenly appeared to switch tack⁵. "This world has three types of people. Those who love meat, those who don't care either way, and those who don't like it at all. They are all born with their desires. But sometimes it happens that someone who loves meat is born in a poor family, yet someone who hates meat grows up with every sumptuous delicacy. Isn't it funny?"

Zhou Zishu didn't speak for some time. Carefully, slowly, he replied: "Wen-xiong speaks in riddles that I don't understand, but I have heard of a precept."

"What is it?"

"An orange in Huainan is called ju, yet in Huaibei it's called zhi⁶."

Though Wen Kexing was initially startled into silence, he suddenly burst out laughing. He rocked back and forth; he laughed so hard that his eyes filled with tears. Zhou Zishu watched him expressionlessly. His wax-yellow face and distorted features betrayed no happiness nor sorrow, yet his slightly downcast eyes seemed as though they could pierce Wen Kexing's heart.

After who knows how long, Wen Kexing—gasping for breath—finally straightened up. Wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, he addressed Zhou Zishu: "In my whole life,

³ He's saying that he will never allow himself to reach enlightenment, i.e., become a Buddha, as long as evil remains in the world.

⁴ Buddhism teaches that our past deeds affect our prosperity in the next life. An evildoer might be reincarnated as a cockroach. So, a human must have done good deeds and practiced pious habits in past lives to attain humanity.

⁵ The actual expression Priest uses is 驴唇不对马嘴; the donkey's lips don't match the horse's mouth. Means that something is incongruous and beside the point.

⁶ Zhou Zishu refers to two different ways of saying "orange", 橘 and 枳, that vary based on region. He is saying that the same person may change depending on their circumstances. Fun fact, the modern name for orange is "juzhi": a compromise!

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I've never seen someone who suits my taste more than you, A-Xu... actually, I know something about crafting disguises myself."

His eyes gazed at Zhou Zishu unblinkingly and saw, even through two layers of skin, that Zhou Zishu had grown uneasy. "Really?" Zhou Zishu asked quickly.

Wen Kexing spoke with all seriousness. "So I can just about make myself look like A-Xiang."

Zhou Zishu was stumped. Seeing Wen Kexing looking him up and down with an indecent expression, he immediately reacted—without another word, he turned to walk towards the inn.

As Wen Kexing watched this tall, gaunt form retreat into the distance, his stare focused on the outlines of shoulder blades that peeked out of his clothes. Wen Kexing felt that, though this man wore rags and had fallen on hard times, there was something indescribable about him. Like that afternoon, when the sun was waning, when he sat on the corner with his eyes squeezed shut. He sat in the open street looking every bit a beggar, yet nobody was more at ease; nobody was more at peace.

Wen Kexing knew then that this person was only there to soak up the sun.

With such a back as this, how could he be anything other than a beauty? Wen Kexing thought, full of self-satisfaction, that his eyes had never missed a single one in nearly thirty years.

When he saw that Zhou Zishu had already gone quite a distance, Wen Kexing finally picked up his feet to give chase. He muttered to himself as he went, "The orange tree didn't have legs, how did it know whether it would become ju or zhi? And whether someone likes to eat meat or not, if one day they accidentally fell into a desolate place without even a human footprint—and they had to devour raw flesh and blood to survive—wouldn't it be painful?"

At nightfall, Cao Weining hurried up to the inn. He sensed that things were not quite right between these two. Carefully, he asked, "Zhou-xiong and Wen-xiong... have you had an argument?"

"Cao-xiong worries too much." They spoke with one voice again.

Wen Kexing swept his narrowed eyes over Zhou Zishu, his gaze as sharp as hooks, full of provocation. Zhou Zishu pretended he didn't see and remained as immovable as a mountain.

Cao Weining scratched his head. "Actually... I don't know how to say this, to be honest; I've heard of it before, but this is still my first time meeting men who..."

Wen Kexing looked up. Under his quiet gaze, Cao Weining hurried to speak: "Wen-xiong mustn't misunderstand; I don't mean anything by it; even though I find it a little hard to

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accept, yet both of you are honorable men... even though it's still a little strange, but... ai, please don't take it to heart, we're all upright folks here..."

Zhou Zishu poured himself an unhurried cup of wine and drank it down in hearty sips. This silly young man, he thought, was talking himself into circles.

Cao Weining lowered his head. He raised it again after a while. Red-cheeked, faint-voiced, he asked: "Then... when the two of you bed down for the night, do you take one or two rooms?"

Zhou Zishu choked on his wine.

Even Wen Kexing stared straight at Cao Weining, thinking, what a strange person we've found.

The atmosphere between the three of them became stiff and strange. Yet before anyone could speak, while Zhou Zishu was still coughing, a bloodcurdling scream rang out above. All the downstairs patron looked up. A waiter scrambled down the stairs, looking as though he'd seen a ghost, stammering, "Murder... Murder...someone's been murdered!"

Cao Weining turned serious at once. He seized his sword and charged upstairs at once. Almost at the same time, two people at the next table—as alike as siblings, a man and a woman in short clothes—picked up their weapons and dashed upstairs as well. There were always those who hastened to mind other people's business. Wen Kexing kicked at Zhou Zishu with the tip of his foot. "A-Xu, aren't you going to take a look?"

Zhou Zishu leaned forward respectfully as he stood up. "After you."

Wen Kexing got up to leave, but his steps paused when he passed Zhou Zishu. Leaning close, he lowered his voice: "If you agree to share my room tonight, I'll disguise myself as A-Xiang for you."

"Much indebted for your deep affection," Zhou Zishu said. "I'd rather go sleep in the stable."

Wen Kexing clicked his tongue. "So unromantic," he said, cutting his eyes at Zhou Zishu. With that, he went upstairs, and Zhou Zishu followed close behind.

The smell of blood assailed them as soon as they reached the next floor. The door to the best room hung wide open. A grave Cao Weining stood in the doorway. He beckoned when he saw the two of them. "Come quick and look at this man."

Zhou Zishu walked over. At first glance, he saw a man leaning against the bedpost—disarrayed clothes that exposed his front, which was stamped with a pitch-black palm print. His hands were cut off and thrown into the corner. Blood had spilled all over the floor. The man's head lolled to the side. His face was blanched. His eyes stared blankly. He had been dead for some time.

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Wen Kexing exclaimed in surprise. "Why does he resemble... that roof-climbing gentleman⁷ who fell into my arms the other day?"

Cao Weining gave an *ah* as well, moving closer to examine the dead man's face. With a strange expression, he said, "He... I think he knocked into me too!"

These brothers in hardship, who had both been saved by Zhou Zishu, looked at each other eye to eye. They immediately felt a bond in the way they had fallen into helpless poverty.

"I know this man," a woman's voice said beside them. "This is that cunning fox with nine claws, Fang Buzhi!"

⁷ 梁上君子: a genteel way to refer to a thief.