

Chapter 8: Moonlight¹

The qin's music was thin yet tenacious, like spider silk, and it seemed to come from every direction. It had an indescribably sinister sound.

Gu Xiang's innards roiled when she heard it, but she quickly realized what it was and composed herself in an instant. Wen Kexing, who had been lying asleep on the bed, got up at some point to stand noiselessly by the window. Moonlight shone onto his face; it seemed to soften his features. He gazed unblinkingly at a spot in the darkness.

His long shadow trailed behind him, motionless. At first glance his face held no expression, yet it seemed to hide a smile, like an indifferent, eerie statue carved from stone. In the night, his dangerous aura could not be hidden.

He looked like a monster that knew neither joy nor sorrow.

Gu Xiang was quite clever. When she realized that something was wrong, she immediately plugged her ears to block out the sound and sat up straight to meditate. It took a long time to suppress the nausea.

Wen Kexing brushed his long, slender fingers across the window frame. He gave a low chuckle. "To think that they've brought Qin Song of the 'Fiendish Melody'... it can't have been cheap. I wonder who he's meant to deal with."

Suddenly, he heard a sound pierce the air. It might have been a qin so rough with disuse that its strings could no longer produce music, only muted plunking—but it might also have been someone throwing a few pebbles into the boundless night.

A few moments later, the ceaseless lingering qin melody did not weigh as heavily as it did. Its power diffused like the ripples from a stone striking the water surface, scattering beyond where the eye could see.

The qin slowed.

Wen Kexing leaned against the window frame and closed his eyes to listen carefully. The corners of his mouth betrayed a secretive smile.

The qin started up again with a frenzied deluge. Its player was going for the kill. At the same time, a sharp note sounded from the neighboring room—it sounded like a dizi², but an ordinary dizi couldn't make such a shrill sound. It was so discordant that the sound could have torn something.

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² Dizi: a reed flute. Associated with jianghu wanderers. Contrast with the xiao, which is a more elegant wind instrument more like a recorder. Wen Kexing plays a xiao in SHL (the television adaptation of this novel).

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The riposte had been perfectly timed. The dizi's wail clashed with the qin's vicious music.

The qin's strings snapped instantly.

Afterward, there was not a sound to be heard.

Wen Kexing stood there for a while. He shook his head as he said to himself, "Live by the sword, die by the sword; the old saying doesn't lie."

Only then did Gu Xiang release the breath that she had been holding and wipe the cold sweat from her brow. "Master, that Qin... Qin whoever, do you think he died?"

Lightly, Wen Kexing said, "Even if he didn't, all his meridians would have snapped. He'd be a cripple from this day forward. I think he's better off dying."

His hand darted forward to push the window open. He made his voice quieter, as though afraid to spook something. "A-Xiang ah, it's a funny thing. You can't get anything in this world without paying something. Using a qin to kill without a trace—it's satisfying, but you have to guard against someone biting back."

Gu Xiang tilted her head, asking, "When would they bite back?"

"When they're stronger than you," Wen Kexing explained patiently.

Gu Xiang nodded. Thought for a while, and then asked another question: "Why pick a fight with someone who's stronger than you? Can't you just go pick on someone weaker?"

Wen Kexing turned to look at her. The moonlight behind him enveloped him in a silver halo and cast a shadow over his already-inscrutable expression. A long pause. Then: "You could pick on nobody at all, and be a good person like me."

With that, he pushed the door open, and a terrified Gu Xiang watched this "good person" walk out.

Zhou Zishu was not in the best of states. His dizi had been whittled when he had nothing else to do on the road, and his technique was likely faulty, because it was always off-pitch. Its notes were so squeaky and desolate that he stopped tinkering with it—who knew that it would come in handy again tonight. He only managed to play one note before the dizi cracked down the middle. Fortunately, he had successfully baited his opponent into using his full strength and was able to land a lucky hit. Otherwise he really had no idea how he would have ended things.

Zhang Chengling looked as limp as someone who had been dredged out of a river. His martial abilities were too feeble; even though Zhou Zishu had immediately covered his ears, he still suffered some internal injuries. He had already thrown up once and his face was wan like paper.

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Zhou Zishu neglected to stabilize his own energy because he was so worried that Zhang Chengling would become ill at this young age. He rested a hand on Zhang Chengling's back, quietly instructing him: "Focus."

He then used his own internal strength to help Zhang Chengling circulate his qi one time, not removing his hand until he saw Zhang Chengling's face recover a little bit of its color. The exertion left Zhou Zishu drenched in sweat.

Silently, he praised his good fortune that it was not much further to Taihu and the Zhao estate, or else he really might dishonor his mission with failure. Since he had gone half a lifetime without doing good deeds, it would be inauspicious to bungle his first attempt halfway through.

Perhaps nobody knew more about the jianghu and its people, both great and small, than this former Window of Heaven commander. He knew who he was facing the moment he heard the qin's music.

This "Qin Song of the Fiendish Melody" was a palace eunuch³ who loved to dress as a woman. His flashy clothes served as warning stripes on this venomous animal. Since he could kill without drawing blood, he turned to killing for hire: whoever paid the highest price could command him like a dog.

Since he had gone quiet, Zhou Zishu knew he couldn't be far from death. Zhou Zishu at his peak would have felt no need to strike such a decisive killing blow, but he had lost half his martial ability. With only a scrap of life remaining, he could not count on himself—instead, he became more vicious by far.

Someone clapped outside the window, speaking words of praise: "To hear the Song of Breaking Willows in the night, who does not yearn for home⁴?' As the stars and the moon, so Zhou-xiong's dizi accompanies the qin—only a beauty could achieve such elegance."

Speaking nonsense to this degree qualified as impressive in its own right.

Zhou Zishu hadn't seen him approach, but there he stood. This man who could appear and vanish like a ghost would have warranted caution even at Zhou Zishu's full strength. As far as he knew, the jianghu held three and a half people with these abilities, and it would not do to offend any of them.

³ It was a long-standing imperial tradition for the emperor to have eunuch servants. (a) no children or wives whose allegiances superseded the allegiance to the emperor, and (b) can be trusted to avoid preying on the emperor's harem.

⁴ This is a reference to Li Bai's poem "A Flute Heard in Luoyang City, on a Spring Evening"《春夜洛城闻笛 / 春夜洛阳城闻笛》. The Song of Breaking Willows is a dizi piece about the sadness of separation. ([source](#)) Li Bai is a very famous Tang dynasty poet.

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He took a deep breath, pushed the window open, and pointed to his own sallow and emaciated face—affecting an exaggeratedly dull-witted expression as he stared at Wen Kexing. “A beauty?” He asked.

Wen Kexing choked on his breath. He swept his gaze over this face—which couldn't be called horrific, yet nobody would trouble themselves to look at it twice—before he turned to look at the moon.

Zhou Zishu swung his legs up to sit on the windowsill. He followed Wen Kexing's gaze: it was a full moon that night. The moonlight was as clear as water, and it shone like frost on the ground.

Zhou Zishu pondered this man who called himself Wen Kexing. Which of those three and a half people was he? And why did he keep following Zhou Zishu? The more he thought, the more confusing it became.

He felt a touch of kinship with this man, and so he knew that Wen Kexing would not go to any trouble unless there was something to be gained. To follow him... or to follow Zhang Chengling to Taihu, surely Wen Kexing was after something. But he thought for a while and gained no insights. He silently scoffed at himself. This was an old fault of his, to obsess over getting to the bottom of something.

Upon looking down, he saw Wen Kexing studying him with keen interest. Zhou Zishu smiled. “If Wen-xiong is really curious, why don't you peel back my skin to see how many layers of flesh and bone I have?”

Wen Kexing raised his eyebrows. “All right,” he said suddenly.

Before he had finished his last word, his hand flashed out to grab Zhou Zishu's face. But Zhou Zishu was more than prepared. He leaned back on the windowsill—his waist folding beneath him—and his leg sliced an arc through the air to kick Wen Kexing's wrist aside.

In an instant, the two had exchanged more than ten blows, moving so quickly that they dazzled the eye.

Zhou Zishu thought that he was getting the worst of it perched on the windowsill. He dipped his head to dodge a jab and leaped down from the window. But nights were difficult for him to begin with, and he had already exerted himself earlier. One of his nails throbbed. His movements slowed.

It was only for a moment, but Wen Kexing's hand was already braced against his chest, preparing to strike. Yet he didn't.

Zhou Zishu looked down at the hand that was nearly touching him. His expression was as calm as before. He smiled again. “Many thanks for Wen-xiong's forbearance...”

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He couldn't finish his sentence before, suddenly, Wen Kexing's hand was stroking his face. No, not stroking—he was positively caressing, like he wanted to feel whether it was made of human or pig skin.

Zhou Zishu didn't have time to escape before Gu Xiang, apparently having heard the commotion, poked her head out of a window. A single glimpse was enough for her to cover her eyes and retreat inside, yelling, "Aiya, so improper!"

—Yes, that was exactly what he thought as well.

Wen Kexing was standing very close. He looked so earnest—he had always looked earnest, but the moonlight gave his expression an ambiguity that made him seem improper indeed.

Gu Xiang didn't bother to lower her voice, muttering without a care, "My eyes are swelling up, I'm going to go blind..."

Zhou Zishu gave a hasty cough and took one big step backwards. He composed himself, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "Master Wen, did you figure out what this face is made of?"

"Human skin." Wen Kexing came to this conclusion after a long moment of muttering to himself. Zhou Zishu expressed his unequivocal agreement.

Wen Kexing stared at his own fingers. "Strange... Strange, it felt exactly like you were born with it."

Zhou Zishu said, unperturbed: "Unfortunately I was."

If there had been a third person there, they would surely have thought that at least one of these two was insane. Except, of course, for Gu Xiang.

Wen Kexing seemed a little unsettled. After looking at Zhou Zishu for a bit longer, he stood and left—not returning inside, but walking away from the inn. Only then did Gu Xiang poke her head out again. She glanced around and said, smiling, "Isn't this nice! I guess my master couldn't take the revelation, so he's gone to a brothel to find his beauties there. With him gone we can all go to sleep early."

Wen Kexing was already a fair distance from them, and he didn't turn around, but his voice floated back to them as though the wind carried it directly into Gu Xiang's ear.

He said, "A-Xiang, do you remember your manners?"

Gu Xiang caved readily. "I'm talking nonsense." She hurried back inside, pulling her window shut—as though she wanted to swallow her words in private.

Only then did Zhou Zishu relax a little, slowly relaxing his body as he leaned against the wall. He clenched his jaw so tightly that he didn't make a single sound.

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He was lucky that the pain came in waves. After a while, when it had abated somewhat, he tidied himself up and went inside.

That night felt especially long.

After three days, Zhou Zishu and young master Zhang Chengling—who, in a few short days, had grown skinny—arrived in Taihu.

At Zhao Jing's door, before Zhou Zishu could explain why they had come, the old steward looked straight at Zhang Chengling. Hoarsely, he said, "You're... You're Chengling? You're Chengling, aren't you?!"

He turned to shout at the servants inside: "Hurry and fetch our lord, young master Chengling is here! Young master Chengling still lives!"

Before too long, Taihu's Master Zhao, Zhao Jing, personally came to receive them. Zhang Chengling fell to his knees with a plop. It seemed that news of the Zhang family's fate had spread far and wide. A group of weeping people surrounded them and escorted the pair inside with much clamoring.

Finally, Zhou Zishu thought, he wouldn't have to worry that someone would trouble his ancestors below the ground—yet doing good deeds and accumulating merits was really too much trouble.