

Chapter 12: Dreamland¹

Wen Kexing didn't know what was in the powder Zhou Zishu scattered, but he didn't ask, as though he knew that he could count on this man. He stood beside Zhou Zishu silently. After a moment, they heard the slowly approaching sound of an animal panting. The beast seemed like it was being careful, passing—unhurried—within three zhang of where the two stood.

It was a large fellow, resembling a dog yet as large as a small horse. It was covered in black fur. It snuffled continuously, which filled the air with a rank meat smell—it slowed its steps even further, sniffing in every direction. It seemed confused.

Zhou Zishu hugged his chest with both arms as he leaned against the wall, narrowing his eyes to peer closely. A faint smile flashed across Wen Kexing's face. His smile was a little cold, and ephemeral, as though it had never appeared before.

The monster was not far, yet it had no inkling that these two people existed. It remained for another moment before moving on again. Two pairs of unblinking eyes followed the large creature as it tracked the stench of blood to the other monster corpses. It sniffed, gave a low growl, and lowered its head to chew with gusto—it really crushed the skull of a humanlike monster between its jaws.

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu exchanged a glance. Zhou Zishu felt inwardly uneasy. Though he wasn't a coroner, yet he had seen much of the world, and would certainly know a human skull on sight. Could it be, he thought, that those monsters really were human? Yet if human, how could they have changed so much?

Wen Kexing poked him and pointed at the little path behind them. Zhou Zishu nodded once, tiptoeing away after him.

The path was sometimes wide and sometimes narrow, twisting who knows how many times. They went a long way before Wen Kexing finally said, in a low voice, "That beast's leftover bones had a different set of teeth marks on it. Do you think the creatures in the water ate their own kind?"

When he wasn't talking nonsense, his voice was exceptionally quiet—like sighing, yet it did not sound weak either, as though he couldn't bother to use even a little more strength than necessary. It gave him a slightly insouciant air. He paused, and then asked, "Are those things human?"

Zhou Zishu glanced at him and replied, equally quietly: "Forgive this one's ill-read ignorance."

Wen Kexing gave a soft laugh. "You, ill-read and ignorant? Ha."

¹ Acknowledgements: thank you to yuer for reading with me! e, julia, bichen, mt, and moose, thanks as usual for your encouragement and help with phrasing tricky bits.

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He said nothing further, only sped up his walking.

They passed through many twists and turns. After turning another corner, the torrential "Yellow Springs" appeared before their eyes again.

"Slow down," Zhou Zishu called suddenly. Wen Kexing turned to look at him, once more wearing the expression that made one itch to beat him.

"What's wrong, pretty Zhou-xiong?"

Zhou Zishu knew that this kind of person thrived on attention, so he couldn't react, or else Wen Kexing really would climb all over him. Thus, he refused to acknowledge anything and allowed the other person to blather as he wished. "The creatures in the water have incredible strength and speed. They can freely go in and out of the water. The beast just now took the dry path; it even knew to keep its distance from the water. We only saw it eat on the shore. It didn't try to hunt underwater. Then how did it catch them?"

Wen Kexing paused in his walking. He swept his gaze over this eerie underground cave. When he spoke, it was unclear whether he spoke to himself or Zhou Zishu. "How large is this place after all?"

Why was it that all their walking couldn't lead them to an end nor a boundary?

Zhou Zishu fell into silent thought for a long time. Suddenly, he spoke, "This river runs from east to west. I kept track of our directions just now. We made a few turns, but we should be walking from south to north..."

"You think it's an illusion?" Wen Kexing perked up immediately. He blinked as he said, "I've heard of another story, and it's supposed to be true, about someone..."

Zhou Zishu turned his back on Wen Kexing. He used his finger to carve a mark onto the wall in front of him, and—without a word—walked away along that strange river.

Though Wen Kexing's ghost stories found a cold audience, he wasn't angry. He rubbed his nose, smiled, and followed.

Suddenly, they heard a fierce animal roar. The entire cave seemed to shake with it. The roar accompanied a scream that sounded so delicate, it could have belonged to a child.

Zhou Zishu halted.

The child wailed more miserably by the moment.

Zhou Zishu immediately strode in that direction. He moved incredibly quickly, crossing a zhang in a mere flash. Wen Kexing was just about to say something, but he wasn't fast enough; the hand he reached out landed on empty air. He could only swallow his words, shake his head, and chase after.

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That horse-sized dog had a little girl pinned beneath its claws, its massive fangs pressed up against her snow-white neck. When it was about to bite down, Zhou Zishu leaped into the air to strike it palm-first. The hit, which was called the Bull-Smiting Spear, connected directly with the beast's head and knocked it askew. Its massive body rolled to the side. In the same motion, he scooped up the little girl—whose breath came in weak gasps.

The big creature shook its head as though the blow had blinded it somewhat. It realized, with a delay, that Zhou Zishu had snatched food out of its mouth. It charged at him with an immediate roar.

Zhou Zishu's first instinct was to throw the girl to Wen Kexing, but—with a slight pause—his feet spun in a dizzying pattern, his silhouette blurred like a ghost's, and he darted back three or four zhang. He gently set the little girl down before speeding off again.

The monster pursued him, opening its fearsome maw and emitting a bloody, headache-inducing stench. Zhou Zishu vaulted into the air and, quick as lightning, flipped astride the monster's neck.

Wen Kexing stood to one side. He glanced once, expressionlessly, at the sniffing little girl, before sitting on a wall to observe.

Zhou Zishu dropped hard onto the monster with a Thousand-Jin Plunge², forcing the beast to collapse. Yet the brute had some intelligence and tilted to fall on its side: it planned to channel the momentum into rolling over and over on the ground. With Zhou Zishu on its back, even if he had copper skin and iron bones, this creature of about a hundred jin would crush him into powder.

As soon as it began to tilt, Zhou Zishu flipped back down and—with a sharp exclamation—drove a kick into the beast's belly.

Though its back was sturdy with intertwining tendon and bone, its belly was exceedingly soft, and Zhou Zishu's single kick nearly rearranged all its innards. It howled in pain, yet its skin was thick enough that it could still crawl upright. Its rear legs were strong, and pain had filled it with anger: it charged forward with lightning speed and widened its massive mouth to bite Zhou Zishu. Zhou Zishu was about to leap out of the way when his breath caught. His internal qi failed.

The beast's fangs were already upon him. He pressed one hand to his stomach and bent his other arm at the elbow—exposing his body to attack, risking it all to elbow his adversary on the snout. The beast's nose broke with an audible crack, but its sharp claws dug into Zhou Zishu's left shoulder. Blood appeared immediately.

² If you've ever played Super Smash Bros, imagine Kirby's move where he becomes a boulder and lands on his opponent. Crushing attack.

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Zhou Zishu found that the beast's snout was a weak point. Without the slightest regard for his injury, he struck out once more at its nose with his other hand. Since he had already broken its nose, his hit directly smashed its forehead with a crisp sound. The beast shakily retreated a few steps and fell with a crash.

Zhou Zishu frowned. He sealed the acupoint on his left shoulder to stop the bleeding. He intended to wash his wound with water from the "Yellow Springs", but—recalling those inhabitants that were like neither humans nor ghosts—abandoned the idea. Wen Kexing made a noise of surprise, asking, "You have an internal injury?"

Zhou Zishu turned back to glance at him. He replied calmly: "I guess I didn't eat enough last night. My movements are weak."

He then bent to pick up the little girl and patted her on the back. Speaking gently, he asked, "Whose child are you, and why were you in this terrible place alone?"

Wen Kexing heard his words and immediately scoffed. "Little girl? What would a little girl be doing here? You'd better ask her what kind of demon she is. Why did you save her anyway?"

The girl didn't speak, but directly burrowed into Zhou Zishu's bosom.

Zhou Zishu did not ask her again. He only said to Wen Kexing, "I'm accumulating merits."

Wen Kexing cast his gaze downward, studying Zhou Zishu's bloodied shoulder with great interest. He suddenly smiled. "Zhou-xiong, you didn't cover your shoulder with pigment. It's too different from your face and your hands. I've caught you out."

Zhou Zishu paused a moment, and replied shortly. "I tanned."

Still smiling, Wen Kexing said, "Not at all. It would be the first time that this humble one has ever heard of a snow-pale beauty getting a bit of sun and tanning to such a wretched state."

The words "snow-pale beauty" successfully made Zhou Zishu shiver. He adjusted the girl in his arms, preparing to speak, but his glance swept across the ground and saw something extraordinary—out of that devilish dog's corpse grew a little tree, and the tree was laden with ... brilliant³ peach blossoms!

Wen Kexing's expression, when he followed Zhou Zishu's gaze, changed immediately.

Zhou Zishu didn't have the energy to care whether someone else's expression changed. He stood there, speechless, staring at the ever-growing peach tree. An unnamable flower scent seemed to float through the air. The accursed dog's corpse had long since vanished; the peach tree absorbed its vitality and grown extraordinarily abundant. In an

³灼灼其华: a reference to the pre-Qin poem 《国风·周南·桃夭》 that uses the peach tree as a metaphor to describe a young bride. [Translation by James Legge.](#)

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instant the tree enveloped a large patch of land—as though he could stretch out his hand and touch it.

Below the peach tree stood a person.

A young man, with thick brows and large eyes, and full lips that always seemed to be smiling. Peach blossoms covered his shoulders in flurries. He paid them no mind, reaching out his hand, moving his lips; Zhou Zishu could clearly make out what he said—*shixiong*.

Jiuxiao...

In that instant, it was as though Zhou Zishu's heart stopped.

Suddenly, pain lanced through his injured shoulder, and Zhou Zishu—caught off guard—gave a muffled grunt. Looking down, he saw that the little girl in his arms had bit down viciously on his wound.

Zhou Zishu threw her off almost by instinct. When he came back to himself, the peach tree and the one below it had all vanished—before him was, as before: the gloomy cave, a massive black-furred beast corpse sprawled on the ground, and the pile of bones that they had examined earlier.

The little girl that he had thrown off gave an inhuman yell. When he gave her a hard look, this was no little girl at all, but obviously a little monster from the water!

The little monster's gaping mouth screamed at him while it gazed covetously at his bleeding wound. It was eager to lunge at him again, but a slender hand reached out and pinched its neck in one swoop. The little monster didn't even have time to struggle before its neck snapped. It fell dead to the ground.

There was a smile lurking in the corner of Wen Kexing's mouth as he carelessly threw aside the little monster's body. He said, as calmly as though nothing had happened: "I know why the things in the water were so afraid that they would even come on land to be eaten by that beast. Looks like we two aren't the only ones to fall for this."

Zhou Zishu felt weak all over. With a bitter laugh, he said, "So we've been going in circles all this time, and now we've come back to the beginning?"

Wen Kexing looked at him, assessing. "Can you still walk? I can carry you on my back... mm, or in my arms, as long as you let me see your face."

Zhou Zishu forced a laugh. "Many thanks. Not necessary."

He covered up his injured left shoulder, gathered all his strength, and continued walking along the "Yellow Springs". Then, he suddenly seemed to think of something: "Just now,

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I saw flowers and grass grow over the beast's body, and a pile of dogtail flowers⁴ jumping and singing. What did you see?"

Wen Kexing answered from behind him. "I saw an owl—I told you hearing an owl laugh was an ill omen, wasn't I right—and I saw a person holding a bowl of red water, and the owl knocked it over..."

Zhou Zishu shut his mouth. He himself had lied, so it was quite fair for the other party to respond with lies.

He was walking in front and did not look back, so he didn't see the expression that flashed across Wen Kexing's face—the smile at the corner of his mouth seemed to freeze there for a long time. His empty eyes stared at the ground, yet seemed to be gazing somewhere very far indeed. When he saw that Zhou Zishu had no patience to hear his ghost story about the owl, he swallowed his voice and silently followed behind.

⁴ 狗尾巴花, or, [desmodium heterocarpum](#).