

Chapter 2: A Chance Encounter¹

The Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns had a secret. Outside of Zhou Zishu, nobody knew it, and likely few now would ever find out. If someone received all seven nails at the same time, they would collapse instantly. Someone with Zhou Zishu's considerable strength might last long enough to leave the palace, but not long enough to pass through the gates before becoming a mute, inert pile of flesh. But if one nail were driven in every three months, the body could—with time—accept the nail into itself. Though the victim would still die within three years, they would retain half their strength. Moreover, they would be able to speak and move like before. The only price was enduring eighteen months of heart-piercing pain that eroded the very bones.

It was said that the pain alone could drive a person mad. Zhou Zishu was delighted to find that this was untrue. At the very least he was not mad now, and, moreover, he could not seem to remember ever feeling so carefree in his life.

Naturally, the Window of Heaven kept an eye on those who chose to leave. Who they were, when they left, where they settled, and where they died: these were all recorded in detail. It was a massive net. Once one had entered it, there was no escaping within this lifetime.

Yet Zhou Zishu had given the Window of Heaven half his life. Even at the end, he had a few loyalists.

Zhou Zishu—who in former years the Rongjia emperor had single-handedly elevated to command the Window of Heaven, whose martial abilities were surpassed only by his mastery of disguise—could walk into a crowd and disappear with one turn of his heel.

So the most terrifying specter to ever stalk the imperial court vanished just like that, leaving behind only a rumpled vagrant who rode on a skinny horse and held a stalk of grass in his mouth as he tunelessly hummed some country ditty. He had become the first to escape the awful net.

He covered his face with a coarsely made human skin mask and daubed greenish-yellow paint on it, transforming himself into a sickly man who looked like he had one foot in the grave and the second soon to follow. When he stooped to drink from a river, he paused to look at his reflection. He thought that it quite suited his real state. The longer he looked, the more pleased he became. He then stole a set of plain cotton clothes from a farmer's house by the road. His fine brocade robe came off and went into the fire. He tied a rusty flask to his waist, half-filled with shoddy rice wine.

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All these years, he had walked in shadow and never used his name when he entered the jianghu². No need to even think of an alias, Zhou Zishu thought happily as he set out again.

He had no particular destination in mind. Everyone said that Jiangnan was lovely, so he set off towards Jiangnan, rested when he felt like it, and fed himself by 'robbing the rich to help the poor'. He rode past Kaifeng and Penglai at such a leisurely pace that three months passed before he saw Jiangnan's green grass and red lotuses.

Once he arrived, the first thing he did was sneak into the best wine cellar and sample each of its osmanthus wines. He got so drunk that he felt like he was floating on air, with no thought in his mind except that life couldn't possibly get better.

After about a dozen days of this, he drank far too much and nearly got caught. Osmanthus rice wine was good, he thought, but too mild and sweet. He was tired of it. So he plunked down some silver and left.

These days in the wine cellar had not been kind to his appearance. He wore a sickly face with a crass expression, and he looked positively emaciated. Even worse, his clothes had been soaking in boozy sweat all this time and had just about turned into wine dregs. His hair hung around his face in messy strands—truly the air of a beggar.

So, when he sat down next to the road to get some shut-eye in the sun, a plump little child ran up to him to take a closer look. They took out a copper coin but hesitated, pinching it in their hand for a long while, because they didn't know where to put it.

“Mister, where's your bowl?”

Someone immediately scooped up the child and took them away. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

So many years had passed. All his friends, all the people he cared about, had gone far away—the ones who hadn't died. Zhou Zishu leaned against the corner of a wall and stretched out his four limbs to bask in the warm sun. The corners of his mouth lifted in a small smile. All these years, he began to think, and for what?

When he was young, he had considered himself to be an exceptional talent. No word of praise was too slight to strive for. He was extraordinarily clever and perceptive; he was a formidable fighter; his knowledge was broad and deep. What a waste it would be if he didn't accomplish great things. Thinking back now, what was it all for?

And how had it turned out?

² Jianghu (江湖), literally “rivers and lakes”, refers to the underbelly of mainstream society. Zhou Zishu's leaving the orderly imperial capital to enter the jianghu, a place with its own laws where the martial sects wrestle for power and mostly govern themselves without the emperor's help.

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Nothing short of giving up his freedom to become the emperor's skulking lackey. He had lost everything and everyone. He'd had to plumb the depths of his ingenuity and endurance to ransom his way out, and when it was done, he'd thought that he had done something terribly clever.

Sorrow seized him again. Of all the fools in the world, surely there were none who could surpass him.

How many years had it been since he could rest and enjoy the sun without a thought in his mind? How laughable it was that so many people hurried past him on the road, when it was his days that were numbered.

From a nearby restaurant, he heard a woman's clear voice: "Young master, check out that guy! If he's a beggar, he doesn't even have an old begging bowl, but if he isn't, he's just been sitting there all morning smiling like an idiot—he's not touched in the head, is he?"

Though Zhou Zishu only retained half of his fighting abilities, his hearing was as keen as ever. The woman had not spoken loudly, and a noisy avenue bustled between them. Yet he heard every word.

Before he could have a laugh at his own expense, he heard a man's voice: "He's just enjoying the sun."

The man's voice was exceedingly pleasant, soft and deep, every word enunciated yet not over-pronounced. Zhou Zishu couldn't resist lifting his head to look. Across the street, on the second floor, a lovely young lady dressed in purple leaned against the banister. A man in gray sat across from her. The man's face was somewhat ashen, but his eyes were so black that they seemed to absorb light. The contrast was so stark that he almost didn't resemble a living person. When Zhou Zishu looked up, their eyes met.

The man in gray glanced away—his expression blank—and turned back around to focus on eating his food.

Zhou Zishu couldn't help but laugh. In this vast sea of humanity, he had nevertheless glimpsed someone who understood him.

The purple-robed girl fixed her large, gleaming eyes on him for a long while. Finally she couldn't resist anymore, spoke a word to the gray-robed man, and bounded down the stairs to Zhou Zishu. "You there, the beggar, how about I treat you to a meal?"

Zhou Zishu shot her a lazy glance and shook his head. "Kind little miss, I'd much rather you treated me to wine."

The girl laughed delicately, turning back to shout up at the restaurant: "Young master, this idiot called me a kind little miss!"

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Alas that the young master in gray did not seem to hear. He didn't even look at her, only concentrated so intently on eating that it seemed like the heavens and earth could collapse without stopping him.

"Everyone else wants food, how come you're asking for wine? What's so good about wine? Can it fill your stomach?" The purple-robed girl asked.

She was beautiful, so Zhou Zishu felt like entertaining her. He said, half-jokingly, "Wine brings forth rosy cheeked-charm³."

The young lady goggled, before breaking into uncontrollable laughter. It shook her body like a flower branch trembling in the wind. Zhou Zishu considered himself fortunate that Jiangnan had so many beauties. Though he admired her, he shook his head in mock-dismay: "A lovely lady in full blossom should pity this white-haired elder⁴. It's terribly ungenerous of you to laugh at my hardship."

She was shocked. "Oh! So you're a scholar." She crouched down and—in a flash—snatched the flask from his waist, ran back into the restaurant, and returned in an instant.

Zhou Zishu made to take it back, but she was too quick. With a laugh, she said: "I'll ask you a question. If you answer right, I'll fill your flask with wine. If you answer wrong, I'll poison it, and it'll burn a hole in your stomach!"

Zhou Zishu smiled bitterly. Good-looking though this girl was, she brought no shortage of trouble. "I won that flask off an old beggar; who knows how many lice have drowned in it. I'll let you have it if you like it so much."

The girl in purple rolled her eyes and giggled. "If you've made me run there and back for nothing, I'll get mad. Then I'd have to kill you!"

Where did this little demon come from, Zhou Zishu thought. As fair as a goddess, and for what? "Then ask," he said.

"If you're sitting here begging, why don't you even have a bowl to collect coins?"

Zhou Zishu snapped his gaze up to meet hers, "When did I say I was a beggar? I'm just sitting on a corner enjoying the sun."

³ Zhou Zishu has made an innuendo. The word I've translated as "rosy cheeks", 红颜, can also be translated as "gorgeous woman". His sentence can be interpreted the innocent way ("drinking can make even an emaciated person like me look flushed and healthy") or ("drinking allows me to borrow the attention of beautiful ladies"). He is quoting from a poem with the line "凭酒借红颜", which occurs both in Li Zengbo's 《八声甘州·自和》and in Li Deyu's 《霜夜听小童薛阳陶吹笛》.

I think the first poem fits a little better (if I understand it correctly) because it's very wistful, talks about how time slips away from you and things will never be as they were, but there's still pleasure in drinking and chatting with your friends.

⁴ Zhou Zishu is quoting from the poem 《代悲白頭翁》 by Liu Xiyi.

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She gaped for a moment. Unconsciously, she turned to look back at the man in the restaurant. The gray-robed man must have had sharp enough ears to hear them. His hands stilled, but he betrayed no other expression. Soon enough he calmly returned to his food.

The girl tilted her head up to look at the bright sunny sky, but still felt confused. "What's so good about the sun?"

Zhou Zishu shook his head and smiled. He stood up and, in a single deft motion, snatched back his flask. The girl gave an *aiya* as he took her by surprise—it happened so quickly that she could only stare.

This bedraggled-looking man said, "You're still young, so you naturally have many things to do. You always have to hurry. I'm buried up to my neck in grave dirt. If I don't drink wine, eat scraps, and wait to die, what can I do except enjoy the sun?"

He tipped his head back to drink a mouthful of wine, exclaiming loudly: "Good stuff! Thank you, young miss!"

He turned to leave as soon as he finished speaking. The girl in purple decided to grab him. She thought that her martial arts were already quite impressive—yet her hand missed him by less than an inch, and in the next instant he was gone.

She wanted to chase him, but the man in the restaurant upstairs spoke softly: "A-Xiang, you weren't fast enough and now you're blind as well? Stop embarrassing yourself."

Though he spoke no louder than a whisper, his voice carried past the noisy crowd from the high tower directly into the girl's ear. The girl in purple got up dejectedly, not daring to attempt any more mischief in front of her master, and took one last look at the crowd before climbing up the stairs again.

Zhou Zishu staggered on his way, clasping his flask close and drinking from it as he walked. Jiangnan was full of rivers. When he passed a small bridge, he peered at himself in the water. His appearance was too shabby for such a place. Probably none of the inns around here would take him as a guest. He followed the river out of the city. Little fishing boats floated on the water, ready to ferry travelers.

Spring was a busy time, with plenty of sightseers. He walked all around without catching an open ferry. Finally, he spotted and approached an old fisherman whose boat sat by the shore.

The old fisherman's boat, with its crow-black sails, stood idle. Other boatmen had no end of passengers, so it was a mystery that he had time to sprawl out and nap on the shore with his straw hat covering his face. Only his dried-out white hair could be seen. Zhou Zishu was in no hurry. He didn't even try to hail the old fisherman. He only sat nearby waiting for the other man to awaken.

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Who knew that soon the old fisherman would get tired of lazing and fling the hat off his own face? He glared daggers at Zhou Zishu and swore at him: "The hell is this, didn't you see I was sleeping?"

Zhou Zishu didn't get angry. "Sir, I'm a customer."

The old man kept cursing. "Fuck your mother, is your mouth for talking shit? Why didn't you say you wanted a damn boat ride?" He flexed his legs as he stood, patted his behind, and looked back to see Zhou Zishu still sitting. He instantly flew into a rage again. "Is your ass stuck to the ground?"

Zhou Zishu blinked. Now he knew why all the boats were busy except this one.

He stood and followed the old man dejectedly. When the old fisherman continued to curse, Zhou Zishu plucked up his nerve to ask: "Sir, do you have anything to eat? I'll even take a bowl of leftovers."

The fisherman gave him a rude retort: "Starved to death in your past life, did you?" He dug a half-eaten tooth-marked bun out of the front of his robe and tossed it to Zhou Zishu, who didn't turn up his nose at the offering. He followed the man onto his boat and happily bit into the bun.

The old fisherman rowed the boat out into the water. He shot Zhou Zishu yet another glare, and muttered fiercely: "Fuck you."