

Chapter 15: The Restaurant¹

“Master, how can you be sure that somebody who’s disguised himself would definitely make himself ugly?” Gu Xiang never hesitated to ask a question when she didn’t understand.

Wen Kexing answered at his leisure. “A person can be beautiful or ugly, but a set of naturally formed features will always have a certain harmony. A disguise can never reach that perfection. People won’t be able to resist taking a second look at a beautiful face, and won’t they spot the flaws then?”

The three of them walked side by side on the wide avenue at noonday. The streets were buzzing with people. Zhou Zishu kept himself in check, listening to them speak without saying a single word—indeed, he pretended to be deaf and mute. He endured their chatter, endured Wen Kexing stealing calculating glances at him, but—when he heard this—he started, and couldn’t resist taking a look at Wen Kexing. This man understood quite a lot, he thought.

Wen Kexing only grew more eager when he realized that someone was paying attention to him. His words flowed like a torrent. “The art of disguise encompasses many techniques. Some paint themselves with pigments. This requires a nimble hand; any unevenness makes it easy to spot the trickery. There are others who attach a human skin mask to their face. The effect is better this way; if done with great skill, you can’t tell real from fake.” When he was done talking, he looked at Zhou Zishu meaningfully.

Gu Xiang immediately wanted to find out for herself, so she extended her fingers to pat Zhou Zishu’s face. Her hand was soft; her sleeve smelled fresh and light like any young woman’s. Zhou Zishu didn’t flinch or dodge. He allowed her to pat her fill with a smile on his face. It was hard to tell who was taking advantage of who.

Patently, gently, he asked: “Have you learned anything?”

Gu Xiang shook her head, full of doubt, turning to look at Wen Kexing. “Master, I still think this is his real face...”

Wen Kexing said, “Of course he isn’t wearing a human skin mask. Those are airtight. To wear one for a long time, he’d need to regularly remove it to let his skin breathe. I’ve tailed him for this long just to see whether he needs to remove his human skin mask.”

Gu Xiang’s face lit up with admiration. “Master, to answer this question, you’ve wasted so much time that you could’ve spent playing around with beauties.”

Wen Kexing pointed at Zhou Zishu. “If he’s good-looking, then I haven’t wasted even a moment.”

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

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

Zhou Zishu thought it over and decided that he could remain silent no longer. So he asked, "When have I ever played around with you?"

Wen Kexing answered without haste. "You haven't before, but you certainly will."

Saying this, he reached to touch Zhou Zishu's face as well. "That day I brushed against your shoulder, the texture didn't feel the same as on your face, ah..."

Zhou Zishu dodged back and knocked his hand aside. Wen Kexing raised an eyebrow. For a few moments, he said nothing. "How come she can touch you?" He asked, gesturing at Gu Xiang.

With great aplomb, Zhou Zishu straightened his ragged sleeves that were full of holes. "If you looked like her, not only could you touch—I'd strip down and let you touch however you'd like."

Gu Xiang originally considered Zhou Zishu an honest beggar, and pitied him silently for having met such a persistent curse in the person of her shameless master. But when she heard these words, she immediately decided that these two were two peas in a pod—two of a lousy kind—absolutely fucking perfect for each other.

They ought to go on and mess around with each other, spend their energy on their slap-fights, do anything other than wreak havoc on the rest of the world.

Wen Kexing turned around and assessed Gu Xiang with an inscrutable expression. He then said, quietly, "A-Xiang, you can scam now."

Gu Xiang *ah'd*, batting her lashes innocently. "Where does Master want me to scam to?"

Wen Kexing drew his arms behind his back without even sparing her another glance. "Plenty of land under the sky. Except Dongting, you can scam wherever you want."

Gu Xiang stood there, dumbfounded, and suddenly blurted out: "Master, are you really drinking vinegar on account of this humble servant?"

Wen Kexing gave her a look. Gu Xiang immediately heeded his instruction. Slapping herself on the cheek, she said, "Stupid, stupid, that'll teach you to mouth off, you talk so much, you just had to give it to him straight, you just had to..."

"A-Xiang," Wen Kexing said.

Gu Xiang gave an "ai" and turned to go at once, but she didn't stop talking: "I'm leaving, I'm leaving. Don't worry, Master, this servant will scam really far. Three legged toads are rare, but is there any shortage of two-legged men? Even if I ate a bear heart and a leopard's guts, I wouldn't dare steal a man from you, the both of you have a good time, don't hold back on my account..."

Chattering the whole way, she ran off with a quickness.

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 8/2022

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

Zhou Zishu mulled over the hidden implications of the phrase “except for Dongting”, watching this rowdy master-servant pair with great interest.

Wen Kexing's expression shifted as soon as Gu Xiang left. With an affected cough, he gave an inviting gesture: “Zhou-xiong, could you do me the great honor of accompanying me for a meal?”

Well, Zhou Zishu thought, even if he said no, this man would stick to him like a plaster. Might as well get a free meal out of it. He cheerfully agreed.

Wen Kexing's face unfurled into a smile as he led the way. Zhou Zishu silently reflected that it already seemed like another life, those days when he flitted through the imperial court as neither a man nor a ghost. He had worn brocade robes and dwelled in hidden places full of plum flowers—he had killed and burned, yes, he had been a beast, yet still a beast dressed in finery.

When had he become so open and shameless?

He glanced at Wen Kexing's back. Whoever touched ink would stain himself black, indeed.

The two walked up the stairs into a restaurant. They had gone hungry for quite some time. When their food came, neither of them spared a word on frivolities: their chopsticks came flying in. They didn't want to lose a single bite. When their chopsticks occasionally collided, they exchanged blows as though—within the narrow span of the table—they were enemies fighting head-to-head. If one won a piece of chicken, the other would win half a piece of paste.

This pair had one who had always been passionate about food, and one who would never pass up a meal when someone was paying. They gave a perfectly ordinary dining table the air of a battlefield with swords drawn and blades gleaming. The air was thick with tension.

When they had emptied a plate and the next plate had not come yet, only then did Wen Kexing take a moment to smile at Zhou Zishu. “Truly, food tastes better when you meet a worthy adversary.”

Zhou Zishu looked at him scornfully. Were you born in the year of the rooster, he wondered, that you'd even fight to eat out of a trough.

They heard, just then, a disturbance from downstairs. A waiter was mocking someone loudly. “Young master, you don't talk or dress like a commoner, so why would you eat and not pay? Pay in calligraphy? You've heard too many stories, haven't you? Which eminent scholar are you, from what dynasty, or perhaps in which topic did you take first prize in the imperial exams? Pay in *calligraphy*...”

The crowd guffawed. Wen Kexing poked his head out to look down. Suddenly he stroked his chin, muttering, “What an elegant beauty this is...”

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

Zhou Zishu followed his glance downwards. A young man stood there with a red face and red ears. He wore dark blue robes and had a xiao tucked into his belt. His clothes, though not gaudy at first sight, were made from fine materials. His jade xiao was of the highest quality as well. It didn't take an expert to see that it had to be expensive. Zhou Zishu realized that this person's outfit seemed a bit familiar. He chuckled quietly.

"What are you laughing about?" Wen Kexing asked.

Zhou Zishu said, "On the surface, his clothes don't seem like they'd attract too many eyes, but they're really very showy. Now, that made me think of someone I once knew."

As he said this, the cornered young man looked all around frantically. He raised his head and just happened to meet their eyes. Zhou Zishu shook his head. The one he remembered was a first-rate silk-trousered young master of the capital, who nobody could surpass for carousing. When would he ever have looked so helpless? Zhou Zishu gave Wen Kexing a kick. "Benefactor Wen, here's an opportunity to earn merit."

Wen Kexing had been studying Zhou Zishu's expression, but he startled now. He reached into his own robes. "Ah, yes, it's only right to extend a helping hand when a beautiful person runs into trouble... oh?"

He patted his bosom with a sudden, strange expression. "Zhou-xiong."

"Hm?"

"I think I'd better leave this merit-earning opportunity to you, eh?" Wen Kexing gave an awkward smile. "This humble one has done enough good deeds for this lifetime, no need to steal them from you..."

Zhou Zishu beamed at him.

After a moment, Wen Kexing sighed. His shoulders slumped. "Just now, on the street, a charming man stumbled. I steadied him, and he even smiled at me... tch, why would such a fine person turn thief?"

Zhou Zishu raised his eyebrows. He decided that he could be a little more shameless so as to avoid losing to the man before him. He pulled at Wen Kexing's sleeve, wiped his own hand on it, and drew a silver ingot out of his bosom. Tossed it lightly. The silver landed precisely on the head of the waiter who was becoming more overbearing with every word. The waiter, taken by surprise, was just preparing to start a tirade when—looking down—he discovered that it was a shining white ingot that had made such close friends with his scalp. His temper dissipated at once.

Lazily, Zhou Zishu said, "Add this young master's bill to mine."

The waiter took his silver and naturally had nothing more to say, bowing and scraping as he left. That blue-robed young man immediately gave Zhou Zishu a look of gratitude as he went upstairs to personally offer his thanks.

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

Zhou Zishu pointed at their table, which was stacked with empty plates, and said to Wen Kexing: "I'll pay for him, and you'll pay for this meal. Don't forget you owe me three liang of silver.

Wen Kexing answered quietly, "What if I pay with my body and my lifelong devotion?"

Zhou Zishu laughed, unmoved. "Apologies. My taste isn't that good yet."

The blue-robed youth had arrived. The two beasts simultaneously hid their ill-intentioned smiles and put out a pair of identical heroic do-gooder expressions, as though they were the kind of people who drew their swords only to right wrongs. The blue-robed young man saluted them deeply. "This one is Cao Weining. I thank both of you for coming to my aid. Please accept my gratitude."

Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu spoke almost with one voice: "No, no, not at all, young master Cao is too polite."

When they spoke, they immediately exchanged a meaningful look which they believed to be quite subtle.

Zhou Zishu coughed, breaking their eye contact as he spoke to Cao Weining, "Please sit, young master Cao, this one is named Zhou Xu, and this..."

"Wen Kexing." Wen Kexing gave a slight smile and a nod. He took his seat a little distance away, looking every inch the good-natured young master. The curve of his smile, the lightness of his voice; he was the image of an honorable man.

Cao Weining gave a round of thanks and sat down without further courtesies. He was the youngest disciple² of the Qingfeng Sword sect, come down into jianghu for the first time in search of experience. Through a stroke of bad luck, he had separated from his shishu³ and fallen prey to a thief. After so many embarrassments, he didn't know what to do, but this was precisely when Zhou Zishu helped him out of a pickle. Cao Weining thought that this was gallantly done. Even that gaunt sickly face had become pleasing to the eye.

Zhou Zishu was long accustomed to the language of the rich and powerful. All the normal people he had met—that is, excluding Wen Kexing—were putty in his hands; within a few sentences, Cao Weining felt as though they had known one another a long time. This chatterbox pitter-pattered merrily: "My shishu and I are making for the Dongting gathering. Who could've known that a few days ago, when we passed Zhao Manor, we heard that something terrible had befallen them; my shishu is old friends with Sir Zhao, so he had to go check, and he told me to go on to Dongting and deliver his apologies to Gao Chong, Sir Gao..."

² Cao Weining is the 关门弟子; the final disciple accepted within his generation before his master decided to stop accepting disciples. Traditionally the most beloved of all disciples, with (informal) standing second only to the most senior disciple.

³ 师叔: martial uncle; younger martial brother (shidi) of Cao Weining's master (shifu).

Copyrighted under US law, meaning that (a) the translator can legally enforce takedown requests, so (b) don't repost, and don't try to profit from this translation.

“Dongting gathering?” Zhou Zishu was surprised.

“Precisely,” said Cao Weining, going on to explain: “Has Zhou-xiong heard of how the Zhang family of Jiangnan was massacred? Even more, a few days ago, the Taishan sect leader inexplicably died in his own home, and three of his best fighters followed him that same night. They died exactly like the Zhang family. Young Master Zhang luckily lives on under Sir Zhao's protection. With his own eyes, he knew the murderers to be vicious ghosts of the Qingzhu Mountains. We're gathering at Dongting because Sir Gao Chong brought out the Realm's Command to summon all the heroes, to eradicate Ghost Valley.”

Zhou Zishu involuntarily shot a look at Wen Kexing, who was listening with great interest. “Oh, really? Is that true?” Wen Kexing asked.

“Unquestionably,” Cao Weining said. “My shishu and I came down at my shifu's command to join the gathering at Dongting.”

Sure enough, this young man had never left his mountain before. Ask him one question and he would tell you everything—indeed, would spill the beans even if you didn't ask.

Wen Kexing said, “Zhou-xiong, didn't you say you wanted to do good things? Why not follow this young fellow for a while? It's a great feat to fight evil and defend virtue.”

Zhou Zishu bowed his head to take a sip of wine. He thought, with downcast eyes, that he couldn't quite understand what Wen Kexing was planning. Yet Cao Weining clapped his hands and said, “A great feat indeed to fight evil and defend virtue; Wen-xiong has hit it on the head. I see the two of you are valiant and forthright, and that we get along very well. Would you like to accompany this junior to Dongting?”

Wen Kexing smiled. “It would surpass my wildest dreams.”