

Echoes

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Summary

During an attack, Zhou Zishu takes a hit and is deaged to his Tian Chuang days.

Before he's turned back to normal, some things are discovered.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Wen Kexing should have realized something was wrong.

He let his guard down, too comfortable with the peace that had commenced after their return from the armoury. They had been visiting a local town, journeyed with Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi on their way back to Nan Jiang during one of their now yearly visits. Wen Kexing had allowed himself to become distracted, watching Zhou Zishu with a smile on his face as his zhiji looked at peace.

He'd only noticed the dart when it was too late.

Wen Kexing doesn't remember much of what happened after, only saw Zhou Zishu's eyes widen before he moved, shoved Wen Kexing to the side as he shielded his body with his own. Felt the moment it pierced Zhou Zishu's body, his involuntary intake of breath, the way his body went slack as panic crawled up Wen Kexing's throat. Saw movement at the corner of his eye where the culprit tried to flee.

When Wen Kexing came to, his hands were stained red, a body on the floor next to him, and Jing Beiyuan was standing over Zhou Zishu, watching as Wu Xi tended to him.

The only thing that stopped him from losing it was Wu Xi's insistence that Zhou Zishu was alive.

Wen Kexing had let his guard down, and now Zhou Zishu is in bed, poisoned or cursed from something they don't recognize.

Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi look after Zhou Zishu because Wen Kexing cannot bring himself to, delays their trip back to their homeland. Zhou Zishu lies in bed, unmoving as he has been for the past day except for bouts of troubled sleep that cause nightmares during which Wen Kexing can only stand there and watch.

Wu Xi says it's the poison working its way through his body, but even he sounds unsure. Wen Kexing knows poison, knows there are very few types that can cause this, the cries of pain that erupt from his zhiji's chest that even Wen Kexing's soothing is unable to sooth.

They can only wait and hope Zhou Zishu survives.

"Han Ying," Zhou Zishu whimpers, "Junxiao."

He says other names too, names Wen Kexing does not recognize but causes Jing Beiyuan to look troubled. Wen Kexing thinks they must have been the other disciples of Siji Manor, the ones his zhiji raised and lost and never truly got over.

They cannot wake him, and nothing Wu Xi has done is working. They have rented a manor near the village where Zhou Zishu was hit. A vacation home that has the bare necessities, but a working infirmary. Jing Beiyuan had sent word out, sought for Ye Baiyi. The old monster had arrived only a while back, grim expression on his face as he went to go look at Zhou Zishu's condition.

Wen Kexing couldn't bring himself to enter the room with the immortal. If he did and Ye Baiyi was unable to wake Zhou Zishu or tell them what's wrong he's unsure how he would handle it. He instead leaves to the kitchen.

He's barely started on dinner when he hears it.

There is a commotion, noise coming from their sleeping rooms. Near Zhou Zishu's room. Wen Kexing's heart speeds up as he abandons his work and runs to the infirmary.

He arrives at a strange scene.

Zhou Zishu is awake, limbs shaking, face wane, but awake, and Wen Kexing would feel only elation if it were not for the fact that Baiyi is held at Jing Beiyuan's neck.

When he tries to step forward, Zhou Zishu presses his blade closer.

"Move and he dies." Zhou Zishu says.

His voice is wrong, flat and serious and not at all like what Wen Kexing has become used to. He looks at all of them as if they were strangers, a blank stare that Wen Kexing knows holds wariness. Wen Kexing does not know if Zhou Zishu sees enemies, if whatever he was hit with has addled his senses enough that he cannot recognize friend from foe.

Ye Baiyi speaks, hand already edging closer to Changming. "What are you doing, brat. Let go of him."

Zhou Zishu doesn't reply. Only stands still. Grips Jing Beiyuan tighter. Turns his gaze to all three of them one by one, until he fixes it back onto Ye Baiyi.

"Who are you."

Wen Kexing truly looks at Zhou Zishu then. Notices the small differences he hadn't been paying attention to earlier, too relieved that Zhou Zishu was awake. His zhiji is slightly shorter, arms not as lined with the definition that he originally had. His face less full, what Wen Kexing had attributed to as due to sickness is instead natural, Zhou Zishu's features present but still not fully developed.

He would think Zhou Zishu had become younger, if it were not for the fact that it was impossible. But many impossible things have happened.

The four of them remain silent, processing. Zhou Zishu stands still, sword held tight to Jing Beiyuan's neck.

Ye Baiyi begins to speak, but Wu Xi cuts him off. Wen Kexing is glad, the old monster would probably only make the situation worst. Zhou Zishu stares at them all with that blank face of his and internally Wen Kexing begins to panic. He doesn't know if this is a curse or a trick or temporary, regardless it will be difficult to diffuse the situation.

Perhaps Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi would have been able to calm Zhou Zishu by themselves, but as they had neared the areas surrounding the Imperial Court Zhou Zishu had carefully

given them disguises, changed their clothes, placed masks on them just like the one he wore when he first met Wen Kexing. Enough so that they are unrecognizable. Even if this were a Zhou Zishu of the past, he would not be able to recognize his friends.

Which leaves them with a dilemma.

Stopping him is not the problem. Zhou Zishu will put up a fight, but Wen Kexing is equal to him as he is now, and Zhou Zishu's skills must have grown from when he was younger. It might be difficult but Wen Kexing can manage. And even if he can't Ye Baiyi will be able to take Zhou Zishu down.

But Jing Beiyuan is still held as hostage, blade to the throat, and Wen Kexing does not think any of them would be able to move fast enough to prevent any damage.

Wu Xi straightens then, tilts his head as his eyes narrow, speaks. His voice is different, colder, more refined, none of the quiet warmth that he uses with his friends.

“Zhou Zishu. You were injured on your last mission with us, and appear to have some memory loss. Jin Wang has given us temporary control of the Tian Chuang. Release my friend.”

Zhou Zishu still does not move, but his face becomes conflicted.

Wu Xi then steps closer. It appears Wu Xi's words have done something, as Zhou Zishu does nothing and only watches with careful eyes. Wu Xi walks close enough to Zhou Zishu to reach, says something, a strange phrase that Wen Kexing doesn't recognize, doesn't fully hear, that could almost be a different language. At that, Zhou Zishu's face pales.

He releases Jing Beiyuan at once, sheaths his sword.

Wen Kexing is about to approach him when Zhou Zishu turns to all of them and drops to his knees.

Zhou Zishu bows, hands clasped in front of him and gaze fixed determinedly on the floor.

“Please forgive me for my transgressions. My actions are my own and do not reflect on the Tian Chuang nor on Jin Wang. I shall accept any punishment you see fit. “

Wen Kexing freezes.

Zhou Zishu thinks that something is wrong. He has lost his memory. The gong-zi Jin Wang have lent him to said so, when he first woke up. It makes sense, in a way. He is not in a location that he recognizes. His body aches with pain but he cannot see the cause of. His head had felt heavy when he first woke up.

They say he has been given to them for two weeks. They know enough information about Jin Wang and the Tian Chuang for it to seem correct. Still, he feels that something is wrong.

When he first awoke he had attacked one of their own, a manor lord, if he were to guess. He had done no harm, and gone to his knees in an apology, but still, he should have been punished. Attacking a benefactor should have resulted in retribution, Zhou Zishu is familiar enough with the rules of the Imperial Court, the inherent malice that existed in every one of them. It should have earned him a beating at the very least, a whipping if they were to be cruel.

He would have taken it without hesitation. Jin Wang would not be pleased at his carelessness.

Yet they had frozen when he had bowed in apology. Paused for a few moments while he had kept his gaze to the ground. They had not done anything except forgiven him, sent him back to bed and told him to rest.

They do not treat him as he has learnt to be treated. They do not ask him to kill, do not send him after whoever they wish with the certainty that he will return with their blood on his hands. They do not ask him to spar against them, do not beat him when they know he must let them to keep the relationship between Jin Wang and them flourishing. They do not even invite him into their beds with an offer than feels more like a command, one that he cannot refuse.

He does not understand why he has been sent here.

He had thought this special treatment was due to his injury, despite the fact that he mostly feels fine and cannot see where he has been injured. But as time has gone by, they still do not ask anything of him.

Perhaps they are waiting to give him his orders.

It should not concern him. His only purpose is to listen.

Maybe it's a new tactic to remind him of his position. Jin Wang likes to play his games, especially as Zhou Zishu becomes more disillusioned with every new dead member of his sect. With every member he sends out on a mission that they do not return from. Zhou Zishu wants to take them all away, back home, back to the Siji manor, back to where they are safe and do not have to worry about the blood on their hands and what they'd had to do to survive in the Imperial Court.

But he cannot. He owes Jin Wang, owes his brothers and sisters who have died during the fight for the throne. And ignoring that, he isn't able to. If it were just him he could leave, he's skilled enough to disappear, roam the Jianghu, forget everything about the Imperial Court and never have to come back to it. He managed to do it before, helped Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi leave. Yet making a single person disappear is one thing, making an entire sect disappear is another. Jin Wang will not tolerate it, accept their dismissal. They'll be pursued and punished and sent back to work, or killed if they're lucky.

Zhou Zishu has no choice. He must stay, must continue in this life of his, one that he doesn't necessarily want but has to put up with. Must take whatever these gong-zi dole out to him in the hopes that it will keep Jin Wang happy, will keep the attention off of his sect members, shield them from the worst of the court.

They say that his shidi are nearby when he asks, but Zhou Zishu does not see them. That, more than anything else, causes him to worry. Han Ying is still growing into his role in the Window of Heaven, Junxiao still has an injury from three weeks ago when he took an arrow to the shoulder. Zhou Zishu is anxious to make sure they are okay, the rest of his sect members safe. They should not be on any missions without him, not when he is unable to protect them.

But the gong-zi do not offer any other information and Zhou Zishu is unable to get any. The manor that he is staying in is practically deserted, empty of any information of where he is, as if it were only for temporary stay. The gong-zi meet with him and speak casually with each other, talk of things that are of no important to Jin Wang. They act as if they have been staying here more a long time, even though Zhou Zishu knows that cannot be true.

It's tentative, the meetings he has with the others. Wen gong-zi give him strange looks, as if he expects something from Zhou Zishu. Ye gong-zi behaves like an old man rather than the youth that he is. He disappears on trips and has only surfaced one or twice since their first meeting. The other two young masters are different, more cautious with him, but unlike usual where it is due to his role as an assassin, here they seem to hesitate for another reason instead, look at him with unreadable faces. Sometimes, when they speak it reminds him of Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi. He hopes they are safe, well off in Nan Jiang. Even if he were not able to leave he is glad the other two were.

Apart from the four of them, there is no one else in the manor. The three that remain seem content to while away time, spend days and nights talking and eating and taking leisure in a way Zhou Zishu has forgotten how to, left behind when he abandoned Siji Manor and joined the Imperial Court. Zhou Zishu figures they are waiting for something, and their behaviour seems to support his theory. Zhou Zishu assumes he shall be given his orders then.

Yet, Zhou Zishu's time here has been peaceful.

They ask nothing from him.

He waits for the other shoe to drop.

It does one day.

Zhou Zishu has been feeling slightly off, his reaction time slower than normal, limbs heavy. He hides it easily, far more easily than he expected. Even if he were getting sick, it still wouldn't do to endanger the mission, show incompetency on Jin Wang's part, nor does he think the gong-zi's compassion will last with his continued inadequacy.

They are eating together, Ye-gongzi had joined them three days ago and surprisingly still not left. And if Zhou Zishu is quieter than normal, well nobody notices as he had very little to speak about in the first place. Zhou Zishu still finds their meals together strange, that they ask him to eat with them with no ulterior motives, as if he were more than a mere assassin they hired.

Then Ye-gongzi gestures towards himself and asks Zhou Zishu to serve him.

The meaning is obvious.

And Zhou Zishu berates himself. He had let himself become comfortable, had let himself feel – not safe, because he hasn't felt safe since the day his shifu died - but less on edge. Had lowered his guard enough in the past two weeks for this to come as somewhat of a surprise. There are others in the room, but he has been asked this in front of others before. And he cannot refuse, not when they said themselves that Jin Wang had agreed with them on the usual contract.

In his line of work, Zhou Zishu prefers blood and death over this, but it is not his choice. At least now he knows what is expected of him.

Wen Kexing doesn't pay attention at first, the old monster is far too comfortable with pulling rank and seniority on them. He frequently asks to be served first, to get the best cut of meat, the first cup of wine. Most of the rest follow him out of respect, or go along with him because he would be a pain otherwise.

Wen Kexing only notices because he is looking at Zhou Zishu.

He still finds it strange. Wrong. In the past few weeks of getting to know this younger version of his zhiji, he had been cold and blank, untrusting in them. They had not been able to get any reaction out of him, even Wen Kexing's flirtations had been brushed off.

They had been careful at the beginning, especially after Zhou Zishu had knelt in apology and only gotten up when Jing Beiyuan had given his forgiveness. Ye Baiyi had looked at Zhou Zishu in such a strange way then, and only when Zhou Zishu was yet again knocked out by the medicine given to him were they able to discuss what had occurred.

Jing Beiyuan had said it was normal for Jin Wang to lend Zhou Zishu and the Tian Chuang's services out to other nobles and people of importance. He'd said it with his mouth pressed into a frown, displeased at the way his friend had been treated, used as a bargaining chip, and only Wu Xi's hand on his arm had been able to calm him. Jing Beiyuan had also explained that any insult to a benefactor would have resulted in negative repercussions for Jin Wang, which was why Zhou Zishu was so worried about his actions. Zhou Zishu was given as a trade. Any disrespect would sour the relations between Jin Wang and his temporary lord.

And that explained much. Even as the weeks passed Zhou Zishu had not become any more familiar with them, any more comfortable. He has been perfectly polite, courteous, manners speaking of his experience in the Imperial Court but he was still stiff, cautious, watching them all with a careful eye and tension that lingered whenever they were in the same room as him.

He had asked about his shidi, cleverly disguised it as questions on the current status of the Tian Chuang. And the four of them had debated about that, how much to say, if Zhou Zishu would even believe them about deaging then whether they should tell him about Junxiao, Han Ying, all those that he had lost. They had decided not to, in the end, when Ye Baiyi had recognized what had happened and told them whatever effect would revert within a fortnight or so. And so they had only to wait for time to pass.

Zhou Zishu had not started to trust them any more, and Wen Kexing knew that it would be practically impossible for him to. He knew little of his zhiji's time spent in the imperial court, serving under Jin Wang as the head of the Tian Chuang. But he knew they were times that his love did not often wish to remember, and so Wen Kexing had left it alone and not thought much of it. He was content to wait for his Zhou Zishu to come back.

A fortnight had passed, Zhou Zishu should be back to normal any time today or tomorrow. They had prepared the infirmary, even Ye Baiyi had come back to visit from wherever his travels took him to make sure there were no major side effects.

And Wen Kexing has been watching Zhou Zishu, keeping an eye out for any sign of fatigue, of injury. He hadn't noticed much, only some stiff movements when they would regularly be fluid that Wen Kexing had written off. He couldn't help but worry, he wanted his a-xu back, the one that looked at him with warmth and love and wasn't hesitant to talk back to him, who could hold his own in a fight, both physical and verbal. Not the stranger who Zhou Zishu was now, who looked back at Wen Kexing with distrust in his eyes.

He'd been watching Zhou Zishu, and that's why he had noticed it.

"Disrespectful brat! Come here and serve me." Ye Baiyi gestures towards himself.

When Ye Baiyi says that statement, Zhou Zishu's expression tightens.

"Serve you?" Zhou Zishu asks then, expression settled into his usual blankness.

Ye Baiyi raises an eyebrow. "What are you waiting for?"

Zhou Zishu reacts again, barely. He glances first at Wen Kexing, then Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi. It takes less than a split second, barely a moment, before resignation flashes across his face and his zhiji fixes his gaze to the ground.

Yet the wait is too long, and Ye Baiyi grows impatient.

"Come here quickly or I will get your shidi to do so." Ye Baiyi says it as a joke, already reaching forward to grab the flask to pour himself wine.

They do not expect that statement to cause any alarm. Ye Baiyi has made jokes like this in the past, referred to Wen Kexing as Zhou Zishu's shidi. It's only a slip of the tongue, one he's done multiple times before in the last couple of weeks. Wen Kexing blames his old age, Ye Baiyi says it's because he's too busy to bother with any of their drama. Regardless, at most, it should have gotten a confused look like it had in the past, when Zhou Zishu inferred that they meant his shidi still in Tian Chuang.

They do not expect Zhou Zishu's reaction.

To the untrained eye it looks like nothing, even with his careful scrutinization, Wen Kexing barely catches it. Anger and the brief glimpses of panic flash across Zhou Zishu's face before he smooths it down.

The others notice Wen Kexing's focus, pause in their actions.

The first time might have been nothing, the second a coincidence, but for it to happen a third time, Wen Kexing is not so stupid as to think everything is fine.

Zhou Zishu speaks before any of them are able to comment on it.

“Ye gong-zi, allow me to serve you. There is no need to bring my shidi-men into this.”

Zhou Zishu speaks in a monotone, face blank, but Wen Kexing sees the hidden tension in his muscles as Zhou Zishu stands from his seat, back upright, head bowed in deference. The sentence makes sense, but there's something off about it. Wen Kexing notes the plural. Obviously Zhou Zishu is referring to his shidi from Siji Manor, those long since dead.

He still doesn't understand.

Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi exchange a glance, turning to look at Zhou Zishu, and something unrecognizable flashes across Jing Beiyuan's face. But Zhou Zishu only looks forward, impassive expression on his face.

Ye Baiyi pauses in his movement, arm still outstretched.

“What?” Ye Baiyi asks it nonchalant, but Wen Kexing still sees Zhou Zishu's pause. A quiet swallow of breath before he speaks.

“My subordinates are inexperienced and unknowledgeable. I would serve you better.”

His words register. Both Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi turn their full gaze back onto Zhou Zishu. Ye Baiyi narrows his eyes.

Ye Baiyi's voice is still deceptively casual yet his eyes are too calculating.

“Would you refuse me?”

Zhou Zishu doesn't answer right away, instead, he bows in an apology.

“Jin Wang has given you Tian Chuang. We are yours to command. Your will is our own.” Zhou Zishu pauses. This time, the span of silence is longer than it should be. “It is my duty to serve you as you desire.”

Ye Baiyi's jaw sets. Wen Kexing feels as if they're on the edge of something, he's not sure if he wants to find out what it is.

There is a pause and none of them do anything, unsure how to react.

Then an expression Wen Kexing cannot read flashes across Zhou Zishu's face. It is one he has not seen before, and Zhou Zishu takes a breath before he drops gracefully to the ground. Kneels. Lowers his forehead to the floor as he bows before Ye Baiyi. Wen Kexing can't bring himself to see Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi's reaction.

Wen Kexing feels as if the air has been stolen from his lungs.

“This one pleads that you let him serve you, master.” Zhou Zishu’s voice is softer, cajoling. Wen Kexing has not heard him speak like this, act like this, before. Zhou Zishu has never lowered himself down like this, in submission instead of respect. Never called another in such a way.

Zhou Zishu should not kneel like this, Wen Kexing will kill anyone who tries to make him.

His zhiji remains still, head bowed.

“Get up,” Ye Baiyi’s voice is curt.

Zhou Zishu raises his head, expression once again blank. He looks as if he is not entirely there. Wen Kexing has seen that look before, on the nights were Zhou Zishu tries to distance himself from reality.

The three others do not let themselves move.

But Zhou Zishu does, takes Ye Baiyi’s words as permission. He moves forward to Ye Baiyi, still kneels as he raises a hand, in that careful way that Wen Kexing knows means he’s holding back tremors, something Wen Kexing is all too familiar with on the nights his zhiji had been tormented by the nails, as he reaches for Ye Baiyi’s belt.

Ye Baiyi grabs his hand before Zhou Zishu can touch him, pushes it away.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ye Baiyi asks.

The answer is obvious.

Zhou Zishu hides his emotions well, but Wen Kexing can still read his confusion. He glances at the three others in the room, before focusing back to Ye Baiyi.

“Do you not wish for my mouth?” he asks.

For the first time, Wen Kexing sees the old monster rendered speechless. It would have been funny if horror and rage hadn’t begun to sear themselves into his chest so deep he feels as if his chest would crack open.

Zhou Zishu takes their silence as something else. When no one replies, he looks down at the floor.

“If you wish for me to serve you in another way, this one asks that his masters let him prepare himself.”

His zhiji’s voice is yet again emotionless. And Wen Kexing wants to rage, wants to scream, at how Zhou Zishu is speaking, at what he means, at how he can act as if this is normal, as if this is expected of him.

Zhou Zishu continues, and Wen Kexing’s heart hurts at the words he says.

“My shidi-men have no skills in this matter, if you wish for someone more youthful, my makeup skills are sufficient, within twenty minutes I will be able to appear younger.”

Wen Kexing doesn't doubt his zhiji. It still makes him want to skin someone alive.

Still, no one speaks.

When Zhou Zishu speaks, it is again with that soft, convincing voice, one that nudges the speaker to listen and follow his words. Wen Kexing wonders when he had learnt it. They haven't asked for his age, it would have made them suspicious, but Zhou Zishu looks young, barely older than a-xiang. And yet he speaks with such a silken voice that Wen Kexing knows must have taken time to nail down.

Wen Kexing will find the person- the people- that taught this to Zhou Zishu and end them slowly.

“Jin Wang has given these esteemed masters the conditions to my stay here. The other members of the Tian Chuang are out. My subordinates will not partake in any of this. Otherwise, you may treat me as you see fit.”

They remain silent.

At Zhou Zishu's next words, his voice changes, a bite of steel that he flashes off to them before it is once again hidden from sight.

“Failure to follow Jin Wang's guidelines will not be tolerated. You may use me as you wish. Touch any of the other members of the Tian Chuang and I shall cut you down where you stand.”

At those words, at the blatant disregard Zhou Zishu has for his own comfort, at what Zhou Zishu is offering and expecting them to take, Wen Kexing cannot handle it anymore. He stands up, looks at his zhiji's too young self as he steps towards him.

He should have thought about this possibility.

Zhou Zishu will not look at him, will not meet his eyes. He has knelt the entire time he has spoken.

When he sees Wen Kexing come closer, Zhou Zishu glances once, up, before he fixes his gaze back into the floor.

“Stand up.” Wen Kexing's voice comes out mistakenly harsh.

Zhou Zishu does so immediately. He won't look Wen Kexing in the eyes, and he sways a little as he gets up. Still, he speaks.

“Gong-zi, this one apologizes for his harshness. I shall accept any punishment you see fit.”

What- how can Zhou Zishu-

“Zhou Zishu, we’re not –”

Wen Kexing grips his shoulder, and berates himself at the fact that he did as Zhou Zishu goes still under his hand, tensed but not fighting back, nothing like how his zhiji holds himself in the future. Zhou Zishu would be the first to throw another’s hands off of him if he didn’t like it, heaven knows he’s done it enough times to Wen Kexing during their first few meetings when Wen Kexing had overstepped his boundaries.

But this version of his zhiji does nothing, stays still, takes whatever is given to him, and Wen Kexing knows exactly why, remembers Jing Beiyuan’s words about contracts between Jin Wang’s benefactors.

It makes Wen Kexing sick.

But Wen Kexing does notice something else, feels the heat coming off of his zhiji’s skin. He sends a sliver of qi into the other man and feels turbulent energy answer back.

His eyes narrow.

“You are sick.”

Zhou Zishu’s eyes widen. He jerks out of Wen Kexing’s grip, wraps himself tighter into his robes. Tries to look Wen Kexing in the eyes. What Wen Kexing had taken as avoidance in the past he realizes is actually because Zhou Zishu *is* sick, tired enough that he cannot focus properly as he tries to speak past it.

“Gong-zi, I am fine, I can still serve you-”

The horrible words stop coming out of Zhou Zishu’s mouth, but only because he collapses.

Wen Kexing moves, catches Zhou Zishu before he falls to the ground.

When Zhou Zishu opens his eyes again, he’s back to his normal age.

Wen Kexing would think that he doesn’t remember what happened, confusion on his face the first few moments of wakefulness, but then Zhou Zishu takes one look at Wen Kexing sitting beside him, Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi standing at the edges of the room, at Ye Baiyi watching carefully from the table at which he’d seated himself since entering the room, and had forced himself up to stand, flushed unnaturally and had fixed his gaze to the floor.

Silence has rained in the room for several minutes since Zhou Zishu had awoken. No one is willing to speak.

And Wen Kexing should be grateful that Zhou Zishu has recovered, but Zhou Zishu won’t even glance at him.

Finally, Ye Baiyi stands up, looks at Zhou Zishu with an unreadable face.

“Qin Huaizhang’s disciple.” He calls out.

Zhou Zishu slowly turns to him, but still keeps his eyes locked onto the ground. His body is tense, strung up as if he were bracing himself.

Ye Baiyi clicks his tongue. Zhou Zishu flinches, barely.

“Look at me,” Ye Baiyi says.

Reluctantly, Zhou Zishu lifts his eyes.

There is a pause, as Zhou Zishu stares at Ye Baiyi, eyes cautious.

“Silly brat, you’re still a useless disciple.” Ye Baiyi says, almost fondly.

At his words Wen Kexing nearly explodes, barely holds back the insults at the tip of tongue. Ye Baiyi’s words that are not needed now, not in this situation, when he sees that Zhou Zishu has relaxed, if only a fraction.

Ye Baiyi clears his throat.

“I’m tired of all you brats, I’ll see you in a couple of months. Until then, idiot children.” Ye Baiyi nods at Zhou Zishu and Jing Beiyuan, glares at Wen Kexing, and tilts his head in Wu Xi’s direction before he leaves the room.

Wen Kexing sees the out that Ye Baiyi has given them and is almost grateful for it. Yet tense silence fills the room once again.

This time, it’s Jing Beiyuan who breaks it. He steps forward.

“Zishu,” he starts, but is interrupted.

“Can we not speak about this.” Zhou Zishu asks.

Jing Beiyuan ignores those words, strides closer to his lifelong friend, takes a breath before speaking.

“Zishu, why didn’t you say anything?” Jing Beiyuan says softly.

And Wen Kexing can guess at the reasons why, he bets Jing Beiyuan can as well, but he still looks at Zhou Zishu and waits for his answer.

Zhou Zishu’s face contorts. He still doesn’t look at them, keeps his gaze on his hands.

“Would it have changed anything.” He asks stiffly.

“Yes.” Jing Beiyuan says fiercely, eyes ablaze. “We could have gotten you out. We could have killed Jin Wang. We could have left the Imperial Court together.”

Zhou Zishu finally looks at Jing Beiyuan, resignation across his face.

“And what about my shidi-men, could you have gotten them out too? Could you have saved them? Taken us away from the court without being persecuted for the rest of our lives.”

Jing Beiyuan is silent.

“It was my fault they were forced into the Tian Chuang. My fault they were trapped in that hellhole, that they were killed off one by one. Protecting the disciples of Siji Manor was my duty. And if I could offer myself so they didn’t have to, there was no choice to be made.”

“Not at the expense of yourself.” Jing Beiyuan grabs Zhou Zishu’s arm.

“Zishu, not at the expense of yourself.” He repeats softly.

Zhou Zishu deflates.

“It’s in the past now, does it matter.” Zhou Zishu asks, voice just as soft.

Jing Beiyuan pauses for several moments. Wen Kexing watches as Wu Xi looks at the two of them, unwilling to step into the conversation.

“You’re right, it doesn’t.”

Zhou Zishu’s shoulders loosen.

Jing Beiyuan continues.

“But Zishu, if we knew, we would have done whatever was needed to stop it.”

Zhou Zishu smiles then, one of his rare ones that he only gives out to those he loves, tentative, hesitant, as if he’s still unsure how to.

“I know.”

Jing Beiyuan squeezes Zhou Zishu’s arm once more before he pulls away, grabs Wu Xi as he heads to the door. In a few moments they’ll be the only two in the room.

Zhou Zishu turns to Wen Kexing. He had been avoiding eye contact with Wen Kexing since he recovered, still is, and Wen Kexing is unsure on how to play this. Unsure how to behave.

But this time, it’s Zhou Zishu who acts first.

“Lao Wen?” Zhou Zishu asks, coming closer to him. His zhiji has an unreadable expression on his face, one that Wen Kexing hasn’t seen for a long time as he comes to stand at his side, barely an arm’s length away.

Zhou Zishu makes a motion, as if reaching for Wen Kexing before he stops himself. Wen Kexing looks at the hesitance on Zhou Zishu’s face, how he’s carefully holding himself away, not as close as what they’d so easily become used to. As if he thought Wen Kexing wouldn’t want to touch him.

And that won’t do at all.

“A-xu,” Wen Kexing replies.

He steps forward and wraps his arms around Zhou Zishu, pulls him close to his chest as he tucks his face into Zhou Zishu's shoulder. The other man stiffens at first, but when he realizes that Wen Kexing is only holding him he grips back, squeezes Wen Kexing tighter and breathes out.

"Lao Wen," Zhou Zishu's voice is muffled by his shoulder.

Distantly, Wen Kexing is aware that Jing Beiyuan and Wu Xi have completely disappeared, closing the door behind them, and Wen Kexing is thankful that Zhou Zishu's friends have given him his privacy.

"A-xu, I've got you."

At his words, Zhou Zishu becomes even more pliant in his arms, tucks his face into Wen Kexing's neck as he lets out a breath.

There will be more to discuss tomorrow, questions to answer. Wen Kexing plans to hunt down each and every person that Zhou Zishu is willing to name, show them just how he earned the title of Ghost Valley Master. But that is for tomorrow. Now Zhou Zishu needs him, and Wen Kexing will move heaven and earth to make sure his a-xu is taken care of.

Now, Wen Kexing will hold Zhou Zishu, and remind him that he's here, and safe, and alright.

End Notes

I think the biggest difficulty I had with this was translating gong-zi/ figuring out what to call them, and also how to translate plurals. Like shidi is one word but shidimen is multiple, but also it seems kinda strange to use shidimen and gongzimen, so it's inconsistent throughout. wx is full on ready to smite anyone who so much as looked at zzs in the past. yby and wx are not far behind. zzs mostly just wants to forget it all.
I hope you enjoyed, leave a comment if you did :)

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