

## Chapter 21: Venomous Scorpions<sup>1</sup>

With unhurried steps, an emaciated man emerged from around the corner. He had a face that you forgot as soon as you saw it, and it was impossible to discern his age. He had lurked there for who knows how long, yet not a single person noticed him.

The man in red frowned momentarily. Something about this man—this utterly unremarkable man, this drop in the sea of humanity—made his hair stand on end. A shiver ran up his spine. He adjusted his stance to face the man, watching him without blinking.

Cautiously, he repeated his question: “Who are you?”

Zhou Zishu's instinct originally drove him to respond as he had to Gu Xiang, with a humble “nobody of significance”. But when he lowered his gaze and saw the bruises on Zhang Chengling's neck, it suddenly occurred to him that he had bowed and scraped for half his life. With these unsavory characters, what was he playing nice for?

The willful wandering-hero impulse in his bones had already been suppressed for too long. Zhou Zishu's stare swept over the gang of men, who were clearly growing nervous, along with the man in red. He laughed, once, quietly. “Do scum like you have standing to ask who I am?”

The red-clothed man's eye twitched. He slowly pulled his hand back into his sleeve. If anyone could see his palm right then, they would have seen the shadowy rage gathering above his skin; the blood-red mark on his face seemed to deepen as well.

The men who had stood beside him had, without any conscious thought, shrunk to the side. After exchanging a glance, they surrounded Zhou Zishu and Zhang Chengling.

Zhou Zishu was completely unruffled. He bent over and, as though nobody was watching, seized Zhang Chengling by the collar and pulled him upright. “Stand up, little imp. Aren't you ashamed to prostrate yourself like that.”

Zhang Chengling froze for a moment, staring at the Zhou Zishu who had donned a second mask. He seemed a little bewildered.

The man in red reined in his temper. “My friend, I only have some business to take care of, and needed to ask this child some questions. Don't...”

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks as always to yuer for reading with me, and thanks to the THC groupchat for ongoing support and spot checks! Especially for profanities...

<sup>2</sup> This is kind of a loose translation of “你算什么东西，管得着老子是谁么”，that I hope gets across the tone and intent—because the literal meaning is difficult to preserve! Zhou Zishu uses a derogatory term to refer to the others (东西) and an aggrandizing term for himself (老子).

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The word “meddle” had not left his mouth before Zhou Zishu’s hand shot out like lightening in the same motion as the man in red, choking the man who had lured Zhang Chengling out there.

That man startled. His own martial arts were not weak at all, but he would never have thought that the skeletal silhouette before him could have a demon’s strength. Before he could dodge away, his opponent held his weakest point in his hand.

Even a martial arts amateur knew that the throat and the chest needed to be protected at all costs. Without thinking about it, everyone would protect those areas instinctively. Someone who would dare go for an opponent’s throat must either be facing a weak enemy or have incredible confidence in his own strength.

Zhou Zishu bared his teeth in a mirthless smile. “Had enough, you son of a bitch<sup>3</sup>?”

The man in his grasp was speechless for a moment before bubbling over in rage. He opened his mouth, prepared to curse his heart out without a care in the world: “You..”

Yet, when he had only spat out a single word, Zhou Zishu viciously strengthened his grip. The man’s cursing choked off into a hoarse cry. In his panic, he lunged for Zhou Zishu’s chest. The two of them were so close that he didn’t even see his opponent move before a tormented shriek rang out. His dislocated arms hung down limply.

Zhou Zishu said quietly, drawing out his words: “I said, you—son—of—a—bitch, have—you—had—enough?”

“What do you mean by this?” The man in red snarled.

Zhou Zishu turned unhurriedly to face him. With an icy smirk: “I only have some business to take care of, and I need to ask this vermin some questions. Don’t meddle.”

He squeezed so hard that tendons bulged on the back of his arm. The man didn’t even have time to grunt before his eyes rolled up in his head. A twitch, and then he stilled. It was difficult to tell whether he was dead.

Zhou Zishu released his grip, and the man fell bonelessly.

At the same time, two people charged out: one made for Zhang Chengling, who had only just stood up, and one—brandishing a long hook that smelled of blood—charged at Zhou Zishu. Zhou Zishu didn’t flinch. He kicked out at a frankly improbable angle and hit the hook-carrying man square in the chest. This kick connected so solidly that the man immediately spat out a mouthful of blood. As he was thrown backwards, he crashed into the man who snuck up on Zhang Chengling, and the two rolled away like a couple of gourds.

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<sup>3</sup> This is once again a loose translation that tries to capture the tone of the original “我是你爷爷吗”. It literally translates to “am I your grandfather”, so Zhou Zishu is asking for his opponent to yield by acknowledging inferiority. It’s very coarse and self-aggrandizing to refer to yourself as someone’s grandfather. For instance, TGCF readers will recall that Qi Rong constantly calls himself everyone’s ancestor.

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Zhou Zishu furrowed his brows. He lifted Zhang Chengling disdainfully, by the back of his collar, as though lifting a kitten—and flung him to the side. Impatiently, he said: “Kid, all you do is make trouble. Be good and stay there. Don't move.”

Zhang Chengling felt his whole body become light, tossed into the corner as though he weighed nothing. In that instant, he widened his eyes a little, and his jaw hung slack. Wordlessly, he said the word “shifu”.

The man in red did not move. Everyone else rushed at Zhou Zishu as though they were of one mind.

Zhang Chengling stared so hard that he didn't even want to blink. He remembered something his father said when he was very little. There were many different paths in martial arts. There were those who stood as strong as a boulder and as immovable as Mt. Tai. There were those whose vigor soared high above the crowd, who conquered every obstacle. There were those who were as the storm gales and the torrential rain, as swift as lightning. And these were only the martial arts that could be described in concrete terms. The most powerful were those who left neither sight nor sound, indescribable, seeming at first sight like the silent spring rain. These could only be summarized as follows: quick as flight<sup>4</sup>, lifting a stone like a feather<sup>5</sup>.

Today, he finally understood what “lifting a stone like a feather” meant.

The men all held identical hooks. Upon a closer look, the hooks were shaped like a scorpion's sting, and emanated a faint blue light that spoke of some secret cold darkness. Zhang Chengling did not yet know that these people were the infamous “Venomous Scorpions”: a gang of ruffians who murdered for hire. There was nothing they would not do for money, even the most low-down and obscene acts that turned the stomach.

Yet now they did not seem to be holding up. Zhou Zishu did not take large steps—his movements even seemed lazy—occasionally advancing or retreating not more than a step. His hands were empty, his body was flexible—as though boneless—flitting this way and that, none of the hook-wielders could approach him. It was precisely these limp hands and feet that, when provoked, became terrible.

Zhang Chengling stared for a long time before he realized, with a start, that he had become dizzy.

Within the time it took to burn an incense stick, thirteen “Venomous Scorpions” had fallen to the ground.

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<sup>4</sup> 翩若惊鸿, the original phrase, is more often used to describe a feminine grace of motion. It's interesting to see it here in a martial context.

<sup>5</sup> This is again a more metaphorical translation of 举重若轻, which means “raising something heavy as though it's light”.

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In that instant, Zhang Chengling felt his hot blood stirring. He couldn't resist making a fist as well. Zhou Zishu lightly brushed some dust off his robes. Without a word, he faced down the man in red. Stared at him for a long while, then tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes. "That birthmark on your face, ordinary folk call it the imp's palm. Could it be you're that harbinger of doom, Sun Ding, the Ghost of Joyous Lamentation?"

The red-robed man's countenance changed immediately.

Zhou Zishu gave a cold laugh. "Ghost Valley has Ghost Valley's rules. Once you've become a vicious ghost, you can't be human anymore. You can't come into the light. Except for the middle of the seventh month<sup>6</sup>, you can't come out. You sure have a lot of guts to make your move at Dongting."

The man in red gnashed his teeth. "You talk too much." Before his voice had faded, he became a blood-red shadow springing into ambush. An indescribable stench hung around him, like blood mixed with the smell of rotting corpses. When a strong wind blew it close, you nearly couldn't see past it.

Zhou Zishu suddenly flew up into the air and back about three zhang.

The man in red lunged out with his palm and hit nobody. Zhang Chengling saw clearly—the ground where Zhou Zishu stood bore a new palm shaped dent. A few grasses, that had been shivering in the autumn wind, shriveled right before the naked eye. The bewildered young man lifted his head to look over. He never expected that this frightening man in red was really the legendary Ghost of Joyous Lamentations, Sun Ding! The one who had killed Mu Yunge and Fang Buzhi.

Zhou Zishu carelessly broke off a tree branch. With a sharp exhale, he thrust it straight between the Ghost of Joyous Lamentation's hands, and the leaves on it immediately turned brown. Zhou Zishu's expression didn't change, nor did he let go. A lift, a push, and the branch suffused with inner qi. It became so supple and strong that the Ghost of Joyous Lamentation almost thought it was a living thing, with almost a notion to hold onto him.

In his alarm, he made to retreat, yet Zhou Zishu stopped him with a palm strike to the stomach. The Ghost of Joyous Lamentation rolled into a somersault with the momentum for three or four steps, his face deathly pale. When he finally steadied himself, Zhou Zishu tossed aside the branch—which had absorbed so much killing energy that it had almost reached his hand—adjusted his sleeves in quick, small movements, and stood there solemnly.

The Ghost of Joyous Lamentation had taken the measure of his situation. Without half a moment's hesitation, he borrowed his backwards momentum once more. He vanished without a trace.

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<sup>6</sup> July 15<sup>th</sup> (in the lunar calendar) would be the Ghost Festival, during which ghosts (of the supernatural variety) can walk freely among the living. Priest extends that meaning to "Ghost Valley" ghosts as well.

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Zhang Chengling, urgently: "He ran away!"

Zhou Zishu glanced at him once, ignored him, and turned to walk in a different direction. Zhang Chengling rushed to follow him, calling, "Shifu!"

Zhou Zishu halted his steps. Frowning, he said, "Who's your shifu?"

Zhang Chengling ran up to him without a second thought, grabbed onto his arm, and looked up at him. He said, with full confidence: "I knew it. You're Zhou-shu, you're my savior, you're shifu."

Other than him, who had such an impatient way of speaking, such shriveled yet warm hands, and such demonic strength? Other than him, who would have come alone out of that crowd to save his life?

Zhang Chengling was certain that this was him, beyond a doubt. Zhou Zishu had made a clumsy job of his disguise to begin with. He hadn't expected to fool everyone, but he did not want even this little brat to catch him out. This setback made Zhou Zishu search for a tactful way to shake him off. "You..."

Before he had finished speaking, his eyes went cold immediately. He yanked Zhang Chengling close to him and stepped to the side. Zhang Chengling hadn't realized what was happening, only that a light breeze went past, and the arms that held him seemed to tense. He heard Zhou Zishu speak coldly: "So you're asking to die!"

A palm strike and, before the ambusher had an opportunity to jump up, his neck bent to the side. Broken.

Zhang Chengling stared. The ambusher was the unfortunate one whose neck had been squeezed in Zhou Zishu's hands. Who knew that he was proficient in the way of the turtle and had been playing dead<sup>7</sup>.

In the next instant, he was again lifted and thrown to the side. Zhou Zishu made to leave without a word, but how could Zhang Chengling let him leave again—he had to shamelessly chase after him.

Yet his vision blurred, that person flashed before his eyes, and then he could be seen no longer. Zhang Chengling knew that he had extraordinary qinggong. Even if Zhang Chengling trained for another thirty or forty years, he might not catch up. He felt miserable. "Shifu..." he mumbled, so distressed that he was almost in tears.

Right then, with a light laugh, a grey-robed man appeared out of nowhere and stepped directly into Zhou Zishu's way. He reached to grab Zhou Zishu around the waist, exactly as though he had timed his entrance to create trouble.

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<sup>7</sup> Priest is making a joke here. The way of the turtle, 龟息功, is a well known traditional martial arts style, but here she's referring to how turtles can retreat into their shells and play dead.

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Zhou Zishu spun in midair, yet somehow his silhouette moved sluggishly, and he was entirely pulled into the grey-robed man's embrace.

The familiar loathsome voice that set his teeth on edge came again. "Incorruptible Zhou-shifu, why are you in such a hurry?"

The two of them landed. Zhou Zishu suddenly gave a muffled grunt and grabbed his own right shoulder. The grey-robed man—Wen Kexing—unceremoniously tore his sleeve. He tore it horizontally too, on purpose, as though he had to drag others with him into his sleeve-cutting proclivities. Then, he frowned. Zhou Zishu's right arm bore two little wounds, bruised purple like insect stings.

Wen Kexing said, "I wondered why you ran so quickly. I see the venomous scorpions stung you."

Zhang Chengling hadn't anticipated this. He looked back at the dead man who had ambushed them, as though he suddenly understood something. His face turned pale.

Zhou Zishu hadn't had a chance to say anything before Wen Kexing's hand flashed out to seal his acupoints. "Shut up," Wen Kexing ordered.

He produced a magnet from his bosom. Carefully, he extracted the two little needles that were stuck into Zhou Zishu's flesh, as thin as an ox's hair. He bent close and, with seemingly no compunction, used his mouth to suck out the poisoned blood.

Zhou Zishu turned as stiff as a rock.