

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 3/2023

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cw: killing, descriptions of murdered corpses

Chapter 27: Massacre¹

He knew that he was dreaming, but the dream felt so real. The north wind blew against his face covering, yet he could feel no cold. He had waited there a long time already. It was peaceful—his pulse beat even slower than usual. As sunlight trickled away, night descended.

Even as Zhou Zishu watched all this, he was long accustomed to tearing himself away—he knew how to stop treating himself like a human, a human with conscience and feeling; only his instinctive self-protection—only doing, never thinking—could stop him from driving himself mad.

He was just a pair of bloodstained hands that supported the flourishing Great Qing. This golden age was an ornate, expansive sleeve, and he was the ever-present hand hidden, ready, within it—until the era's wars and corruptions all passed, everyone lived in peace, and history turned to its next chapter...

Zhou Zishu looked down. Faces were usually murky in dreams, but he thought he saw that little girl's face—she was held in her wet nurse's arms; the woman looked like a helpless lamb, yet she held fast and protected the child to the very end. Her face was filled with despair.

The girl raised her head and said softly, "My dad is a good person, my big brother is a good person, I'm a good person, we're all good people. Don't kill us."

He remembered; this was when the previous emperor was still alive. Seeking to land a fatal blow on the second prince's faction, the Window of Heaven obeyed orders to assassinate Jiang Zheng, Sir Jiang, the disgraced official who was leaving the capital—along with his whole family. Sir Jiang's little daughter Jiang Xue was four years old and exceptionally clever. If she had the chance to grow up, what would she have become?

Zhou Zishu felt his own hand thrust forward—the woman's piercing scream sliced across the night sky—the longsword pierced through her chest into the little girl's body. He felt neither revulsion nor agony; his position had long accustomed him to such acts.

You're good, you're loyal, and so what? Where is it written that good people can't be murdered in the street with their bloodlines extinguished?

A sigh sounded from the open air, and lingered; someone said, "A life demands a life—"

Pain stabbed through Zhou Zishu's chest. He forced his eyes open and shot upright.

¹ Thanks as always to yuer for reading with me, and thanks to the big brained THC groupchat for helping me refine the tone!

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Then he hunched over slowly, clutching at his chest, clenching his teeth hard to suppress a groan. His bloodless fingers gripped a corner of the blanket. With his tangled hair, he looked wretched indeed. Amidst wave after wave of sudden, crushing, splitting pain, a hazy thought: Zhou Zishu, you rotten bastard, now you're going to die too.

Zhou Zishu did not sleep well that night, nor Wen Kexing, nor even Ye Baiyi.

Wen Kexing did not go outside; he merely sat quietly by the window. Gu Xiang stood beside him. This unrefined girl—who would even make light of carving an epitaph—bore an entirely serious expression. She gazed into the gloomy night, which was no different from any other night. Still and silent, she struck an eerie figure—like a beauty painted on a paper lamp.

The window was not closed. A cold wind lifted Gu Xiang's long hair and the edges of her clothes, ruffling the pages of an erotic picture-book. A sudden smile began to unfurl across Wen Kexing's face. Quietly, he said, "I've waited twenty years already."

Gu Xiang watched him in absolute silence. The man's expression showed an inexpressible relief, so much that it gave his smile a tinge of madness—in the dark, he looked a little inhuman. He filled her with fearful reverence.

Wen Kexing stretched his hand out and clenched it around nothing, as though trying to catch the wind that had blown in through the window. "I'll make it so that nothing on this earth can stop me. Man or ghost, god or demon... I'll drive the whole monstrous rabble, these things that don't belong among humans, back into their eighteen hells."

He held in his other hand a piece of paper. Gu Xiang's gaze landed on the yellowing sheet, which bore the sketch of a demonic ghost face. The brush strokes were somewhat clumsy like a child's scribbles. Wen Kexing stood, lit a candle, placed the sheet onto the flame, and bit by bit it burned into ash.

His expression was pious, as though he was burning an offering for the gods.

Ye Baiyi slept until, in the middle of the night, something startled him awake. His elegantly narrow eyes held no trace of just-awakened grogginess; he remained flat on the bed, slowly lifting his hand to take out a pendant that hung around his neck. He toyed with it. Upon a closer glance, the little pendant was a fastidious miniature of the Realm's Command.

Ye Baiyi closed his eyes. He spoke to himself, "Changqing, I can't shake this ominous feeling, but I can't make it out either. How is it that you just aren't here anymore..."

If this world had no Realm's Command, no Ghost Valley, no Glazed Spiral, and no Window of Heaven—wouldn't it be much more peaceful, he thought.

The next morning, at dawn, everyone was greeted by the sight of corpses.

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Nine corpses, all piled together not far from Gao Manor, arranged in a circle that spanned at least two or three zhang. In the center, someone had written with blood the word "Ghost". The display blocked off a whole street, right at the spot where—rumor said—they had executed the ghost.

When Zhou Zishu hurried onto the scene, the corpses had nearly all been identified. The ghost horde had been exceedingly fair in spreading good fortune among the prominent sects: eight influential sects in addition to the Gao sect made nine corpses total. Monks, Daoist practitioners, nuns, men, women, old, young—all were represented.

One of Gao Chong's disciples were among them. Zhou Zishu had no deep impression of him, only that he was not as exceptional or eye-catching as Deng Kuan—on the contrary, he spoke very little. He helped to receive visitors and said hardly anything to anyone. Gao Xiaolian had already fainted with weeping, yet there was no time for Gao Chong to attend to his precious daughter. He directed Deng Kuan to take care of her while he inspected the corpses one by one with Master Ci Mu.

This one was strangled with a thread, that one was killed with a bloody palm, that one was bled dry, that one was dismembered... strangely, each of them died in a different way.

Zhou Zishu heard someone sigh quietly, saying, "The Ghost Valley of Qingzhu Ridge unleashed its full strength."

He turned his head; the one who spoke was Ye Baiyi. Zhou Zishu was astonished to find that this glutton's expression betrayed a hint of indescribable compassion, lending him the air of a porcelain Guanyin² statue.

Reflexively, Zhou Zishu asked, "What?"

Ye Baiyi shot a glance at him and said, his face now devoid of expression, "Are you deaf?"

Zhou Zishu thus turned away, not wanting to provoke further indignities. But Ye Baiyi patted his shoulder and spoke without any sense that something was out of the ordinary: "Come out and go somewhere with me tonight." His tone had something in it that resembled how Zhou Zishu had spoken to Zhang Chengling the night before.

Zhou Zishu had resolved against paying any heed to this Ye upstart before he learned some manners, but simply couldn't stop himself from nodding.

He regretted it to his core the moment he nodded—wanted nothing more than to wring this troublemaking head off his own shoulders. He pondered whether he might feel better if he killed this so-called disciple of Gu Seng where he stood, and silenced him that way.

² The Buddhist bodhisattva/pusa associated with mercy. Ubiquitous folk goddess.

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A sudden voice from the crowd: "Why were these the only victims? Everyone here came to stand against Ghost Valley. Those demons sneaked in yesterday and caught us off our guard, so why did they only murder people from these couple of sects? Speak up if you know! Does Ghost Valley want to pit itself against the entire jianghu? They can't be so stupid. What are they planning? Or are some of you hiding something?"

Gao Chong stood up at these words. He looked smaller, more withered, less energetic; his steps wobbled slightly. Deng Kuan rushed to support him, but Gao Chong pushed him aside and waved him off. Unhurried, he cast his gaze outward: across the grief-stricken and furious countenances of the eight strongest sects, towards those whispering throngs who each harbored their own suspicions. His gaze had its own weight that suppressed everyone's voices.

They watched this man, who had reigned as a legend in the wulin for the past twenty years—his hair was peppered with white, his expression was solemn. He opened his mouth. Softly, without rushing, he murmured: "This is a blood debt."

Gao Chong bowed his head and stared at those nine corpses for a long time. His voice grew louder: "Blood debt... for my Gao Manor, for every righteous sect, for everyone... everyone in the world with a conscience!"

It seemed as though he was breathing unsteadily. Master Ci Mu gripped his prayer beads with an "Amitabha," closed his eyes, and muttered to himself—likely blessings for the victims. Deng Kuan watched his aged shifu with concern, as though he still wanted to support his arm, but—since he felt this would not be respectful—he resisted.

Gao Chong kept gazing downward for a while until he looked up again. Tear stains crisscrossed his face. He pointed at the slain young man from Gao Manor, saying, "This disciple of mine never had his parents. When he joined my sect, he took my name: surnamed Gao, called Gao Hui. Didn't like talking. When kids made fun of him, they gave him a nickname, they called him stick-in-the-mud..."

He looked like he tried to smile but couldn't manage it. A few of Gao Manor's female disciples couldn't hold back their sobs.

Gao Chong halted, then began again, "My little stick in the mud was a good kid. Many of you saw him these past few days. He was a doormat, he'd let anyone push him around... but he really was a good kid. He worked hard, didn't complain, and never made anyone ashamed of him. He's still got a grandma at home, no blood relation, but she took him in when he was little. She's over eighty years old now; blind and addled, can hardly recognize anyone...except for this Gao Hui child, she could still say something to him... everyone, how can I explain this to her? All you heroes gathered here, tell me what excuses I can make to this elderly lady!"

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The autumn wind blew cold in Dongting, and waves crashed against the shore³. The crowd was so silent that it might not have contained a single living person. Gao Chong stood among them all, a venerated elder, bowing to ask everyone—how can I explain this to that aged grandmother?

Even a scoundrel like Feng Xiaofeng kept his mouth shut and stayed quiet. If anyone said an errant word at this point, they would be less than human—less than a beast.

The newly appointed leader of Tai Shan sect—Hua Qingsong—was the first to call out: “The wulin can't have peace as long as these rabble stay alive! From now on my Tai Shan sect will take orders from Sir Gao without question! Even if we die in the hundreds, we'll take revenge for our sect leader and these murdered comrades!”

The murder of the Tai Shan sect leader had set them adrift. Hua Qingsong was only a young man of twenty, full of vigor—he didn't understand that his outburst had backed everyone into a corner and compelled them to speak. Several major sects followed one after the other to proclaim their support.

That afternoon, under Gao Chong's direction, they held a magnificent funeral for the dead. A sepulchral gloom hung over all Dongting. The merry crowds of yesterday were abruptly subdued, as though they had run up against an enemy.

Gao Chong was a canny man. The same people who had been plotting their own designs now coalesced against a common enemy.

That evening, Zhang Chengling—who had been sent away, but ran back when he got a chance—brought with him an unexpected guest: Ye Baiyi. This careless fellow had gone out in the middle of the night without even an overcoat. He rapped on the window imperiously. “You, come with me.”

Zhou Zishu didn't have a chance to realize his designs of killing this man. It was too late for regrets, so he could only follow him out.

Wen Kexing's room was right next door, so he heard what happened from the very beginning. He furrowed his brows and crossed his arms, an ill-favored expression on his face.

Gu Xiang was hanging upside-down from the roofbeam. Her eyes were closed, but the noise started her awake. She yawned. Blearily, she asked, “Master, first you thought this Zhou Xu might ruin your plans because you couldn't get a read on him. It's only been a few days. How come you're not afraid of him ruining anything anymore? And you're always watching him?”

³ This is a quote from Cao Cao (155 – 220)'s poem《观沧海》.