

Chapter 5: The Vicious Ghosts¹

"I'm surnamed Zhang, called Zhang Chengling." The boy sat down, his round face dirtied with black marks and stained with every other color. Though his clothes had been torn to tatters, one could still make out its brocade embroidery, far beyond what ordinary people could afford. "Zhou..."

He stopped, not knowing how to address this unfortunate man who looked like a beggar.

"Just 'uncle' will do," Zhou Zishu said bluntly.

Zhang Chengling tried to squeeze out a smile without much success. He lowered his head again. When he lowered his gaze, all he could see was the dust and grass that covered the floor of the abandoned temple. He felt numb. For a moment he didn't know where he was. Too many misfortunes had struck that night, and he could hardly keep up.

Gu Xiang muttered under her breath, "Zhang Chengling? Sounds familiar."

Zhou Zishu asked: "Is your dad Champion Zhang, the master of Nanhe?"

Gu Xiang startled, blurting out: "You're Zhang Yusen's son?"

She didn't conceal her disbelief at all. Her expression laid bare her doubt: *why would Zhang Yusen have such a useless son?* Zhang Chengling clearly understood and hung his head down even further. He clenched his hands into fists, pulling them close to his sides.

Zhou Zishu, having discovered that this girl would always say what people didn't want to hear, hurried to preempt her devastating words. He sighed. "To think that I hadn't noticed. Apologies for the slight."

Gu Xiang rattled on, as quick and relentless as the sound of beans pouring out of a bag. "Your father's pretty famous, isn't he... We already heard about him when we got here, the day before yesterday. They say he was really a hot-shot when he was a kid. Now that he's got money and a family, he's settled here, half-retired, and doesn't stick his nose into anything. He hosts lots of strong fighters at his manor, so nobody wants trouble with them. With a father like this, who would hunt down his son in the middle of the night?"

Her tone was light and uncaring, which displeased the old woman. She said, "My lord was always a charitable man of the highest degree, with fine heroes as his guests, compassionate and generous, loyal and fair. If anyone in need sought him, whether he knew them or not, he always extended a hand..."

¹ Acknowledgements: thank you to yuer, e, julia, bichen, and k!

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 5/2022

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.

Gu Xiang sneered, her voice turning sinister. "Fine, auntie, we all know this kid had a good strong father, but so what? Weren't they cut down in the middle of the night anyway?"

Zhang Yusen had been around fifty, with an illustrative and well-deserved reputation. He married early, had children early, and was not seen much in the jianghu thereafter. But he still received invitations to every grand occasion. Zhou Zishu thought that this girl spoke too disrespectfully about a prominent deceased man, though she might not have intended to offend. He interrupted her: "The one who wanted to kill you just now, who was he?"

Zhang Chengling remained silent for a moment, before speaking quietly: "He was Hanging Ghost Xue Fang."

"Who?"

"Who?"

Zhou Zishu and Gu Xiang spoke at nearly the same time. Zhou Zishu furrowed his brows, while Gu Xiang wore a strange expression of surprise.

Zhang Chengling spoke haltingly, "He was Hanging Ghost Xue Fang, I heard someone call him that myself..."

He sucked in a sudden breath, as though he had just remembered or realized something. The evening's blood, smoke, and screams all appeared before his eyes. He shivered, his face pale, twitching all over—he couldn't speak anymore.

Gu Xiang startled in fear, pointing at him, "Is he epileptic?"

Zhou Zishu supported Zhang Chengling with a somber expression, tapping an acupoint that made the boy collapse into his arms. Only when he carefully deposited Zhang Chengling to the side did Zhou Zishu answer: "He's just now reacting to what happened. He's had too much of a shock. Let's let him sleep for now."

He turned to address the stupefied old woman: "Auntie, did the Zhang family fall to some conspiracy?"

The old woman, seeing Zhang Chengling like this, sat dumbstruck for a long time—wiping her tears and snot—before managing to explain clearly. Earlier that night, the Zhang rear courtyard had caught on fire, and a group of unfamiliar people in black descended from the sky like vicious ghosts.

Most frightening of all, those skilled fighters who ordinarily stirred at the faintest breeze were nowhere to be found. Nobody knew when they had been slain.

There was only old man Li, the oddity who had arrived fifty years ago on the banks of the Suzhou River and plied his living as a ferryman. He watched over the Zhang family in secret for all that time, though he was unwilling to enter their home—according to

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.

him, once he had eaten their rice, he would become their hired thug. This he was unwilling to do. He had only come to repay his gratitude. It was the Zhangs' fortune to have met such a strange man, who managed to save one vein of their family's blood.

Zhou Zishu did not speak for some time, until: "That Li-xiong really was a character." He turned towards the old woman again. She was only a simple servant who couldn't understand much, or do anything other than tag along and drop tears. "Auntie, do you have any relatives left?"

The old woman nodded. "I have a nephew down south."

Zhou Zishu dug a gold ingot out of his robes and gave it to her. "Please take this and go your own way. You've already done your duty to young master Zhang by following him this far. Since you're getting up in years, don't take on any more of his hardships."

The old woman took the money and, without thinking, bit down on it. She smiled in embarrassment when she realized what she had done. Now that she wasn't crying anymore, she spoke much more briskly. "All right. An old servant like me would only burden the young master, anyway."

Having taken the money, she did not want to stay in that corpse-ridden place any longer, and said that she would go. Nobody would waylay a simple servant like her. Zhou Zishu therefore said nothing and only watched her leave amid effusive thanks.

At midnight, Zhou Zishu felt a needle prick in his chest, and realized that the Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns had begun their mischief. This pain was not sharp like exterior wounds, nor blunt like internal ones. It was rather as though someone had used a small knife to cut along his meridians one inch at a time.

Fortunately, he had gotten used to the sensation over the past year and betrayed no inkling of it. He wore the human skin mask, so Gu Xiang could not tell from his complexion either.

Recalling how carelessly she had mentioned Zhang Yusen—as well as her elusive, inscrutable master—Zhou Zishu gathered his scattered thoughts. He asked, "That fellow who was at the restaurant today, didn't he come with you?"

Gu Xiang was speechless for a moment. "How did you know we were together?" Then, she nodded, "Right, you heard us talking—and I was wondering why you said the exact same thing as my master when you answered my question." Her mouth twisted with dissatisfaction at his trickery.

Zhou Zishu smiled. "Yes. Is your master here now?"

Gu Xiang sat on the incense stand, swinging her legs back and forth. She tilted her head innocently. Casting her eyes downward, she shrugged. "He's gone to see an old lover."

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.

Since she was so good-looking, Zhou Zishu thought that the gray-robed man must certainly have made her his mistress. He looked askance at her.

Gu Xiang wrinkled her nose and glared at him. "What are you looking at me for? He went to sleep with a man, do you expect me to go listen at the window?"

Zhou Zishu coughed awkwardly. He rubbed his nose. "Such words from a young lady..."

Gu Xiang had spoken as sharply as a little beast, but afterwards, she seemed to remember something. With the tip of her foot, she nudged the still-unconscious Zhang Chengling. "Do you believe what he said? That black-robed guy was Hanging Ghost?"

Zhou Zishu paused for a moment. "If... he meant the Hanging Ghost of the evil ghosts from the Qingzhu² Mountains..."

Gu Xiang gave him a sarcastic look. "Shows how much you know. How many Hanging Ghosts are there?"

Zhou Zishu shook his head. He tried to speak, but the blunt pain in his chest stopped his voice. He had to put on a thinking expression until his strength returned. "They say that there's a valley between Fengya³ Mountain and the Qingzhu Mountains. People call it Ghost Valley. These past years, anyone who committed unforgivable crimes or needed shelter—anyone with nowhere to go—would go to Ghost Valley. Once entered, they could not become human again. All their debts became dust—whether debts of blood, or debts of gratitude. Nine out of ten couldn't even survive in Ghost Valley. The stories about Ghost Valley itself are so frightening that nobody dares to chase someone once they've crossed its borders. I heard that Hanging Ghost Xue Fang was once a notorious debaucher who killed twenty-six young men and women, including the Emei⁴ sect leader's personal disciple. Six great sects joined forces to hunt him down, but he had already escaped into the Qingzhu Mountains' Ghost Valley."

Gu Xiang blinked. "So do you think it was that Xue Fang?"

Zhou Zishu said, with a smile, "That Xue Fang made a fearsome name for himself thirty years ago. How could a little girl like you have taken him down with two or three hits?"

Gu Xiang nearly flared up at that, but after a moment's thought, realized that he had a point. She nodded. "Right. If I could kill the Hanging Ghost just like that, then green smoke would come out of my grandfather's grave. But I don't have parents, so I don't know where his grave is—maybe he doesn't even have one, so there wouldn't be any green smoke, so that definitely wasn't the Hanging Ghost."

Zhou Zishu didn't understand what the green smoke had to do with the Hanging Ghost. But when he saw that she was so pleased to have figured it out, he didn't have the heart

² 青竹 (qing1zhu2): green bamboo.

³ 风崖 (feng1ya2): windy cliff.

⁴ The Emei martial sect is a staple of wuxia stories, on par with Shaolin Temple.

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.

to correct her. His body hurt terribly. Without making a sound, he leaned to one side and closed his eyes to endure until daybreak.

The Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns vexed him after midnight every day, without fail, so he always slept early to shore up his strength. Yet, today he had been interrupted, and would get no rest for the rest of the night. He could only grit his teeth. Only when light began to glimmer in the east did his pain start to lift. Zhou Zishu felt that his whole body had gone numb.

He had only gotten a little rest when suddenly, Gu Xiang—who had been leaning asleep against the Buddha statue's pedestal, her head drooping—awoke with a start. Her apricot-stone eyes scanned all around. Curtly, she said: "Someone's here."

Zhou Zishu frowned. Naturally, he heard it as well. He tried to stand immediately, but his legs wobbled, and he had to sit back down. He turned his head. Seeing Gu Xiang staring at him in surprise, he had to pull himself up slowly with one hand on the incense stand. Quietly, he said: "My legs got numb from sitting."

This excuse was too flimsy, so Gu Xiang's expression became even more surprised.

Zhou Zishu was weakest at dawn. His brief nap just now wasn't enough to restore him, so he was in no hurry to fight. He said, softly again: "Hide him, and then hide yourself."

"Hide? Where?" Gu Xiang's large eyes looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Zhou Zishu didn't know what to do.

It was too late to move now. A group of masked, trained fighters broke down the door and, seeing Zhang Chengling unconscious, launched themselves at the group. Zhou Zishu was still leaning against the incense stand. He saw a masked person raise a knife to strike the boy. In a flash—it was too quick for anyone to see—his fingers, as shriveled as the human skin mask, closed around the masked person's throat.

The masked person couldn't even scream before his whole body twitched once, and he died.

His ruthless move had really scared them. The masked people all paused to size up this invalid who had seemed too weak to even stand straight.

Gu Xiang stuck out her tongue, leaped off the incense stand, and stood behind Zhou Zishu.

Zhou Zishu knew with one glance that these people were all bark and no bite. Professional assassins wouldn't have so much regard for their own lives. An assassin of the Window of Heaven, for instance, would pursue their objective without the slightest hesitation—even if it was their own throat in someone's grip, let alone a comrade's. These certainly couldn't be the fierce ghosts of Ghost Valley, either, because those all

Translation by Lianzi @tyklianzi (c) 5/2022

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.

fended for themselves. They wouldn't cooperate like this. Someone, then, was targeting the Zhang family.

He slowly rearranged his sleeves as though his rags were the silver-hemmed robes of yesteryear. When he realized that this was incongruous, he stopped—and smiled impertinently. “Gentlemen, at this hour in the morning, without so much as a greeting, attacking a child who doesn't have a single inch of iron to defend himself—isn't it shameful?”

Author's note:

In the next chapter, I'll have Wen-dage show his face properly...