

Chapter 6: A Beauty¹

Nobody made a sound. The assailants quickly exchanged glances and came to a decision. Instead of pursuing Zhang Chengling, they slowly formed a circle around Gu Xiang and Zhou Zishu.

Gu Xiang sighed. “Bad luck. I never did a good thing for three hundred years, and the one time I do something it’s a whole mess. Zhou-xiong, I’m just a delicate woman. I haven’t been in a fight like this before. I’m really scared, I need you to protect me.”

This last sentence really was “a phrase so shocking that it would take a poet’s tireless labor to compose”². Zhou Zishu had to catch his breath. He shot Gu Xiang a dirty look, but she didn’t even blush.

Gu Xiang sent a bitter glare right back at him.

The masked people clearly objected to the two of them gazing at each other with such perverse tenderness. Someone whistled, one of them sprang forward, and the rest swarmed after to contain them like a net and cut off any escape.

Only then did Gu Xiang sober up. With an exclamation of surprise, she no longer feigned weakness—indeed, paid Zhou Zishu no mind at all—and drew her little dagger to meet them head-on.

Their attack proved stronger than she expected. She had confidence in her own abilities, but against fourteen people—though none could match her alone—they hemmed her in, like one entity with innumerable hands and feet. She was in desperate straits. No choice but to fall back with the net steadily closing around her. Nowhere to retreat.

Gu Xiang was rattled, though she didn’t show it. She had already retreated to Zhou Zishu’s side. They stood back-to-back. His unblinking gaze intensified. To Gu Xiang, he said quietly, “I see I’ve underestimated them.”

Gu Xiang had her hands full. Her forehead showed a slight sheen of sweat. “What... is this formation?”

Zhou Zishu said, “I’ve never seen it. I’ve only heard that there’s a fourteen-person array called the Far-Flung Formation. They push on without rest and can’t be stopped. Each person’s blind spot is exactly covered by the one next to them, without seam nor flaw...”

Gu Xiang yelped in surprise. Zhou Zishu had raised his hand and blocked—with his bare hand—a blade slicing downward. He knocked the blade clean out of its owner’s grip.

¹ Acknowledgements: yuer, e, julia, bichen, and k as always!

² This phrase (语不惊人死不休) is a quotation from the Tang poem 《江上值水如海势聊短述》, by 杜甫. The poet ruminates on his ambition to write astonishing poems that people would carefully study—he wouldn’t rest until he accomplished this. Yet as he grows older, his abilities diminish. He no longer worries as much as he once did. He prepares a little boat to go paddling on the river and wishes for like-minded companions to spend time with. Thematic, right?

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Gu Xiang asked hastily: "Then what do we do?"

Zhou Zishu didn't answer. His gaze sharpened. Suddenly, he swung one foot onto the incense stand and kicked off into the air before the dusty old stand even had a chance to wobble. Three attackers immediately vaulted up after him, their flashing blades blocking his advance. Yet Zhou Zishu did not advance—he retreated, as slippery as a fish, and in the blink of an eye he was beside the Buddha statue.

With a push of one hand—and a grunt—he knocked the stone Buddha clean off its perch. How did he have the strength? Zhou Zishu said only one thing: "Buddha, show mercy and save me this time."

The heavy stone Buddha fell, bringing a gust of wind with it—Gu Xiang ducked in fright and the wind grazed her scalp. Zhou Zishu's three assailants couldn't anticipate such a quick counterstrike. With no time to rally nor hide, they could only try to stand their ground. But how could they? The Buddha knocked them back, and suddenly the seamless formation had an opening cut out of it.

Gu Xiang chuckled darkly. "Now that's interesting." In a flash, she flung her arm out and an arrow flew from her sleeve into the person in front of her. The masked person didn't have time to make a sound before collapsing backwards. The remaining assailants lost their nerve, but Gu Xiang's blood ran hot and she charged at them without fear.

Zhou Zishu had just used up his energy before he had even fully gained it back. His hands and feet tingled numbly. He didn't try to play the hero anymore. Instead, he sat quietly on the incense stand.

Gu Xiang only realized his inaction after a long while. In the flurry, she glanced back and complained, "Zhou Xu, what are you doing?"

Zhou Zishu answered in a leisurely manner. "Young Miss Gu, I'm only a weak beggar. I haven't been in a fight like this before. I'm really scared, I need you to protect me."

This made Gu Xiang so angry that her hand slipped, and she got her knife stuck in a masked assailant's rib. She couldn't pull it out.

Gu Xiang had a slight figure that lacked the strength for a drawn-out fight. Now that she had lost her weapon, she was a little frightened, and retreated three steps to shift into defense. Zhou Zishu had gotten his breath back but did not leap into the fray, only watched them with a bright smile. He picked up a handful of pebbles. Played with them idly. Suddenly he tossed one, and it hit a masked person's forehead right before they launched a sneak attack.

He started giving instructions at the same time. "No, no. Kid, your moves are too sloppy." Like lightning, he shot a pebble that struck an attacker's Huantiao³ acupoint—they wobbled and fell forward, right at Gu Xiang's feet. Gu Xiang instinctively

³ A sensitive location right behind the hip joint. Like to the side of the butt.

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lifted her foot, popped a gleaming short knife out of her embroidered shoe, and slit the person's throat. Zhou Zishu continued in his unruffled tone: "Your stance is your foundation. If your motion has no root, how can you avoid losing control?"

Gu Xiang was a very clever person. As she stooped to dodge a blade, her leg shot out to kick her opponent's knee. He fell forward, giving her the opportunity to paralyze his pulse with a single smack and wrestle his sword out of his hand. Another strike to his Baihui⁴ acupoint sent him on his way to Yan Wang.

Zhou Zishu shot out another pebble at someone's side Jianjing⁵ acupoint just as they lunged at him. Half their body went numb, and they fell to the ground. Gu Xiang heard this accursed beggar saying, with an insincere sigh: "What a pity. The formation's already broken and still you charge in like this; you've really put the cart before the horse."

When she heard this, Gu Xiang instantly flew into a series of nimble Lotus Steps. The oncoming masked assailants couldn't land a single hit on her. As they shifted to continue their attack, they broke their formation and delivered themselves right into Gu Xiang's hands. She quickly dispatched another two.

The corpses on the ground were piling up. When the remaining attackers saw the tide turning against them, they decided—with a glance between them—to retreat. Zhou Zishu frowned. These people really were troublesome. Though he had agreed to escort the boy to the Zhao family in Taihu, he didn't want to deal with these killing attempts the whole time. Anyone who escaped now would only return later. These people who schemed in the shadows and slaughtered entire households could not be good people in any case.

Gu Xiang only saw a blur flash before her eyes. The man who had just been sitting on the incense stand moved as swiftly as a wind-blown willow catkin and alighted at the temple door. Caught off-guard, the black-clad man before him shifted to shoulder him aside—but with a *crack* his entire shoulder was dislocated. Zhou Zishu held his neck in one hand and snapped it with a twitch of his fingers. He nudged the man's fallen sword with the tip of his foot. An eerie smile drifted across his sallow face.

Gu Xiang couldn't even react before every one of the masked people fleeing to the door had become a corpse. She blinked a few times in surprise. His manners and his way of speaking made him sound like a braggart from some ostentatious sect, but he silenced those men with such nimble cruelty that she could not guess what kind of person he was.

Zhou Zishu was not really as impressive as all that. His leg still felt wobbly, and he hadn't rested since he made his landing. Now that he had finished his killing, he was having trouble standing upright. But he didn't want Gu Xiang to realize, so he merely

⁴ Located at the top of one's head.

⁵ Located where the neck meets the shoulder.

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allowed himself to retreat a few steps—though his motions seemed graceful, he was merely searching for something to lean on.

Suddenly, a pair of hands shot out to steady him from behind. Zhou Zishu shivered. When had someone gotten so close to him? The hair on his neck stood up, but luckily the person only held him and nothing more. Gu Xiang's eyes lit up. "Master!"

Only then did Zhou Zishu relax a little, turning around once he was sure he wouldn't fall. The one who caught him was indeed the gray-robed man from the restaurant. Up close, he couldn't be older than twenty-nine. Though his features could be called handsome, his fixed gaze had a way of making one uncomfortable.

He was staring at Zhou Zishu in just that way now, as though he wanted to look beneath Zhou Zishu's skin. It was extraordinarily impudent.

Zhou Zishu coughed. "Many thanks to..."

"Wen, Wen Kexing," said the gray-robed man. He wore a doubtful expression that only intensified as his eyes flitted down to Zhou Zishu's neck and hands.

Though he didn't know what this man was looking at, Zhou Zishu had no fear. He would have died ten years ago if his handiwork was so easy to detect. Evenly, he said, "Ah. Then, many thanks to Wen-xiong."

The gray-robed man looked for a long time at who knows what. Finally, he averted his gaze and nodded. "No need." He ambled into the broken-down temple, Gu Xiang rushing to clear corpses out of his way. She then spread out some rushes to give him a clean place to sit. This Wen Kexing looked at Zhou Zishu again, as though he hadn't looked enough, and explained: "I didn't do it on purpose."

Zhou Zishu now understood who had taught Gu Xiang her unlikeable attitude. He found a spot off to the side where he could sit and rest.

He did not open his eyes until more than two hours had passed. Wen Kexing was leaning against the wall, one leg curled against it, still examining him with his head tilted. Zhou Zishu couldn't resist saying, "Do I have something on my face, that Wen-xiong's studied it for so long?"

"Did you disguise your face?" Wen Kexing asked, without expression nor inflection.

Zhou Zishu's heart tightened, though his face gave nothing away. "What?"

Wen Kexing continued as though he were talking to himself. "Strange... really strange. I can't tell how you would've disguised yourself, but to say that you didn't do anything, well..."

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He rubbed his chin in confusion. "I've never been mistaken about looks. As soon as I saw your butterfly bones⁶, I knew you had to be a beauty."

Zhou Zishu had nothing to say in reply.

Wen Kexing nodded, declaring, "I've never been wrong. You must be wearing a disguise."

Zhou Zishu still had nothing to say.

Wen Kexing studied his face assiduously for another long while before throwing his head back in apparent defeat. "But I just can't see it. To pull this kind of little jianghu trick so well that I can't see any flaw—nobody could do it. No, it's impossible..."

Gu Xiang said breezily, "Master, last time you saw a pig butcher from the back and swore up and down that he was a beauty too."

Wen Kexing replied in a soft voice. "He was a butcher, but his glimmering eyes had a charming look to them that made him a beauty. If anyone can become a hero, what does it matter that he was a butcher? You don't understand—what does a child know about looks?"

Gu Xiang sighed. "Glimmering eyes? Charming look? What, he yawned and forgot to wipe his eyes? And don't forget his wide nose, his huge mouth, his fat face..."

Wen Kexing retorted without hesitating. "A-Xiang, you have bad eyesight."

Zhou Zishu slowly crawled upright and went to check on how that boy Zhang Chengling was doing.

The author has something to say:

Wen-dage is here = =

⁶ Referring to Zhou Zishu's shoulder blades.