

## Chapter 7: On the Road<sup>1</sup>

When Zhou Zishu tapped Zhang Chengling's sleep acupoint, he was merely concerned that Zhang Chengling's heart could not last much longer, and used only a little strength to give him a respite. He awoke again not long after that strange Wen Kexing arrived.

Upon opening his eyes, he stared vacantly at the roof of the ruined temple. Yesterday he had been the eldest young master Zhang, hailed by a thousand and loved by ten thousand—though his tutor shook his head and called him indolent, like mud that would not be formed into bricks<sup>2</sup>, though his martial arts master believed deep down that he was as steady as soft mud—his days had been happy.

If he wanted clothes, he only needed to extend a hand. If he wanted food, he only needed to open his mouth. He had a houseful of servants following to attend his every whim. Though he was not much of a scholar, he never lacked for someone to refill his incense when he stayed up late reading.

Zhang Chengling knew his own limitations, but with such constant praise it was difficult to prevent it from going to his head. He lived in such a honeyed state until he was fourteen. Within a single night, it was all gone.

His home, his parents, his relations, his friends—all gone, his world turned on its head entirely. He was frightened and at the end of his wits.

Though Zhou Zishu had two perfectly good hands, he didn't really know how to comfort people, so he just sat by himself. Zhang Chengling stayed silent for a while as tears tracked down his face.

Wen Kexing asked Gu Xiang, in an aside: "Who's that little thing?"

Gu Xiang said, "I heard that's Zhang Yusen's son."

Wen Kexing nodded with a calm expression, as though the words "Zhang Yusen" weighed no more on his heart than a fleeting cloud. He paused, then asked, "They say the Zhang family is so poor that they have nothing but money. How did Zhang Yusen's son fall into this state? Did he leave home without bringing enough silver? Or did he get lost and can't find his way back?"

Gu Xiang replied quietly, "I heard someone snuck up on the Zhangs last night and killed them all. Everyone was talking about it. Master, you must have had such a good time messing around last night that you didn't hear."

Wen Kexing thought for a moment and decided that she had a point. He nodded again. "No wonder the ground is covered in corpses."

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: e, julia, bichen, mt, and moose, thanks as usual for your encouragement and help with picking the right words!

<sup>2</sup> The original text is quoting from the Analects of Confucius 《论语·公治长》: "粪土之墙不可朽也!" If you make bricks out of dirty mud, and then build a wall out of those bricks, the wall will wash away under wind and weather.

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He began sizing up Zhou Zishu again, asking Gu Xiang: "Then what's he doing here?"

Gu Xiang sneered. "That beggar calls himself Zhou Xu. He took two silvers last night and sold himself to this kid; he's going to escort him to Taihu."

Wen Kexing widened his eyes slightly, his expression turning solemn. He said to Gu Xiang, "Then he must be a beauty. Make no mistake, only beautiful people can be this stupid."

Gu Xiang was used to pretending she hadn't heard. Zhou Zishu couldn't make heads or tails of this person, so he did the same.

He lowered his head to glance at Zhang Chengling, who was still dripping silent tears, and felt a bit annoyed. Wasn't this brat done yet? Zhou Zishu tapped him lightly with the point of his foot, saying drily, "Young master Zhang, if you've rested enough, how about getting up and packing your things? We shouldn't stay here. We don't know how many assassins are chasing after you to finish the job. Since I accepted the responsibility, I have to deliver you to Taihu with all your limbs intact."

Zhang Chengling's eyes wandered around the room and glazed over again. He buried his face in his hands, curled up like a big shrimp, and started sobbing. This made Zhou Zishu's head hurt. He couldn't bear to scold him, but he didn't know how to console this kid either. So he sat for a while in silence before shooting to his feet and walking towards the door.

He only wanted to check on the Buddha statue that he knocked over. Though he had extended his hand to do good deeds, this hand ended up offending the Buddha instead. Most unfortunate. He had to find a way to put the statue back. Yet Zhang Chengling thought that he was leaving and rolled over with haste, climbing up to throw himself around Zhou Zishu's legs, pleading, "Uncle Zhou, Uncle Zhou, don't... don't leave, I... I..."

His sniffles were pitiful indeed. Though Zhou Zishu was nobody to him, yet there was nobody else he could rely on, so he treated Zhou Zishu like a savior god.

Zhou Zishu looked at him expressionlessly. Without inflection, he said, "Didn't your father teach you that a man must not kneel lightly?"

Zhang Chengling faltered, but he plucked up his nerve again at the thought of losing his lifeline. He scrubbed hard at his cheeks and wiped his snot and tears on his sleeve. "To respect the heavens, the earth, the emperor, and one's family and master—these are sacred duties. Uncle Zhou, you've done me great kindness. Please let Chengling salute you as his shifu<sup>3</sup>!"

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<sup>3</sup> Chengling is speaking in third person, which here signifies a formal speech register. Shifu (师父, shi1fu5) is the word for "teacher, master". The shifu-disciple relationship is nearly as close in wuxia as parent and child, and expected to last for a lifetime (barring some great transgression). Chengling is asking for Zhou Zishu's permanent help and protection.

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Wen Kexing and Gu Xiang looked on with great interest. Gu Xiang said, in quiet appraisal, "Eh? Yesterday he was just a scared little idiot, how come he's wised up now?"

Zhou Zishu only said, "Get up first."

Zhang Chengling did not budge. "If shifu won't agree, I won't get up! They killed my family; if I don't take revenge, how can Zhang Chengling still be called human? Shifu..."

Zhou Zishu did not feel like listening to his grand plans. One hand shot out to grab his shoulder and forcibly pulled him up like lifting a little chicken. Self-deprecatingly, Zhou Zishu said, "I'm a cripple who's halfway into the ground. I can't even take my next day for granted. What could I teach you? I heard that the renowned Zhao Jing of Taihu was your father's old friend. When I bring you to him, you won't have to beg; people will line up to teach you martial arts and help you get revenge."

He turned and, with some effort, lifted the Buddha statue around its waist. He carried it to the incense stand. One strong push set it right again as he repeated "my apologies, my apologies" a few times. He bowed twice, hastily, with his hands clasped together. When he turned to look at the dazed Zhang Chengling, he said, "If you can stand, let's go. Aren't you going to take revenge? We have to find Zhao Jing. I'll take you to get something to eat."

Then, as though nobody was watching, he stretched his limbs lazily. Gave Gu Xiang a smile, ignored Wen Kexing, and turned on his heel to leave without caring whether Zhang Chengling followed. Zhang Chengling stood in aggrieved silence for a moment but, realizing that he really was leaving, rushed to follow him out.

Wen Kexing rubbed his chin with one finger as he watched the departing pair with great interest. After a moment of deep thought, he slapped his thigh and got to his feet. To Gu Xiang: "Let's go, we're following them to Taihu."

Gu Xiang's silly smile vanished. She muttered to herself for a while, before saying quietly, "Master, Zhang Chengling said that the ghosts of Qingzhu Mountain were the ones who massacred the Zhangs last night. Hanging Ghost Xue Fang was there too."

Wen Kexing gave her an indifferent look. "Right. And?"

Gu Xiang hesitated, but Wen Kexing was already walking out. She hurried after him. She cut straight to the point: "That Hanging Ghost was definitely a fake, the one I killed yesterday. Did... Master know anything ahead of time?"

"A-Xiang." Wen Kexing swept his glance over her, with those eyes that seemed like they could swallow someone whole.

Gu Xiang lowered her head at once. In a whisper: "Yes, this servant spoke too much."

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This girl, who was unafraid of anything, went pale in the face. She was terrified. Wen Kexing gave her another searching look. Once satisfied, he turned away and kept walking. Gu Xiang walked silently behind him as she had always done.

She heard Wen Kexing talking to himself. "We'll follow the one with the surname Zhou. I definitely haven't gotten it wrong; he must be a beauty. I'll certainly have an opportunity to catch him out along the way. If you don't believe me, A-Xiang, we can bet on it."

So it was that Zhou Zishu would not have a peaceful journey.

Bringing along Zhang Chengling was like bringing along the world's stinkiest fart. They attracted untold "flies" along the way. Zhou Zishu had fought off another gang that night; looking at the two silvers in his hand, he began to regret his choices.

He still had half of his power and all of his training. Though these people were no match for him, the Nails of Seven Apertures and Three Autumns weighed on his strength, and he had no patience for the assailants coming in shifts at all hours. On one hand he had to defend against the oncoming "flies", and on the other hand against the master and servant who inexplicably dogged his steps.

If Zhou Zishu had been alone, he could have shaken them off easily, but he had his little burden. Plus, that Wen Kexing must have been a deity from who-knows-where. Though Zhou Zishu shook them off several times, within half a day, Wen Kexing's eminently punchable face would appear again.

Without making a sound, Zhou Zishu dragged the black-robed would-be assailant's corpse outside. Then he went back inside to sit in the dark and meditate. Zhang Chengling was deeply asleep and heard nothing. How fortunate he was<sup>4</sup>! These few days, Zhou Zishu did not feel as though the boy behaved like an intolerable young master. At first it was as though he was made of water, like a child who only knew how to cry, but passing through an ordeal forced him to grow up all at once. No matter how hard they had to travel, he never complained. Whatever Zhou Zishu said was law. He was incredibly biddable. Only, he would never stop calling "shifu".

Well, if he wouldn't stop then he wouldn't stop, Zhou Zishu thought. In any case he would drop the kid on the Zhaos' doorstep in Taihu, walk away, and travel wherever he liked. He had planned it all out. He still needed to see the Three Famous Mountains, the Five Great Mountains, and the great lakes. No time left to go north. He still had an old friend in Nanjiang to call on; he couldn't go to the Yellow Springs without paying this friend a visit and having a drink together...

Suddenly, the young man on the bed started thrashing. He was dripping with sweat. This happened almost every night. Though he maintained that everything was fine, that

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<sup>4</sup> In the original this is 不亦乐乎 (bu2yi4le4hu), a piece of a classical Confucius quote repurposed for a less-than-lofty purpose... making fun of Chengling.

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he was cheerful and focused on his revenge, the memories from that night followed him like a wicked shadow. Zhou Zishu sighed and shook him awake.

Zhang Chengling sat up with a shout. His eyes were unfocused; he did not come back to himself for a long time. He turned to Zhou Zishu and said, in a small voice, "Uncle Zhou... I didn't do that on purpose."

He was so young. Though his eyes were bloodshot, his gaze was as pure as it had always been, in a way that was unaccountably familiar. Zhou Zishu suddenly remembered someone whom he had buried deep in his memory. The one who had... so wholeheartedly wanted to wander the jianghu with him. For a moment, he stared into space blankly.

Tentatively, Zhang Chengling said, "Uncle Zhou, I didn't mean to wake you, it's just that I dreamt about my father..." His lip wobbled. He was too pale. "Maybe... Maybe I won't sleep anymore?"

Zhou Zishu patted his shoulder, unconsciously softening his tone. "Don't worry. Go to sleep. I'll wake you if you have another nightmare."

Zhang Chengling gave a quiet assent and burrowed back into the blanket. Without realizing, he clung tightly to Zhou Zishu's sleeve.

Zhou Zishu gave this sleeve a meaningful look. Zhang Chengling smiled in embarrassment as he pulled his hand back.

At this moment, not far from here, it seemed as though someone plucked a string. A clang that Zhang Chengling felt on his eardrums, like a sudden clap of thunder. He could feel the tremor in his guts. When the sound passed, he felt a sharp pain—with a muffled groan, he clapped his hands over his stomach—

The author has something to say:

I broke my nail, it hurts so much... but I'm still working hard to type! Aren't you moved!